THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

MAY, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 4

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE WORLD'S END AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

From Manhattan to Tibet, THRUSH had forged an incredible weapon to bring all mankind to its knees, as U.N.C.L.E. racing against time, faces its toughest, most deadly foe.

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Editorial Director

H. N. ALDEN
Associate Editor

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THE WORLD'S END AFFAIR

It was madness, devil made. It was horror, created by a satanic master of terror. Half a world apart, Illya and Napoleon Solo had one day to find and destroy THRUSH'S latest, deadliest challenge to U.N.C.L.E. and the world—a man made storm which could bring the world to its knees—or to ruin!

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

PROLOGUE—"WHO TURNED OFF THE SKY?"

IT WAS A splendid way to end a dangerous mission. Splendid, at least, until the jarring moment when some madman or other repealed the laws of nature. But until that moment, it was a splendid way:

First-class compartment seating. The porcelain-smile attentions of three fetching stewardesses. Iced champagne at 35,000 feet. The day was clear. The sun had a sharp crystalline brightness. It blazed in a serene, cloudless sky, and glared blindingly from the silver hide of the great jet engines of the commercial airliner.

Far below, the South China Sea glowed like a fine old painting. Mr. Napoleon Solo studied it, trying to recall what the pilot had just said over

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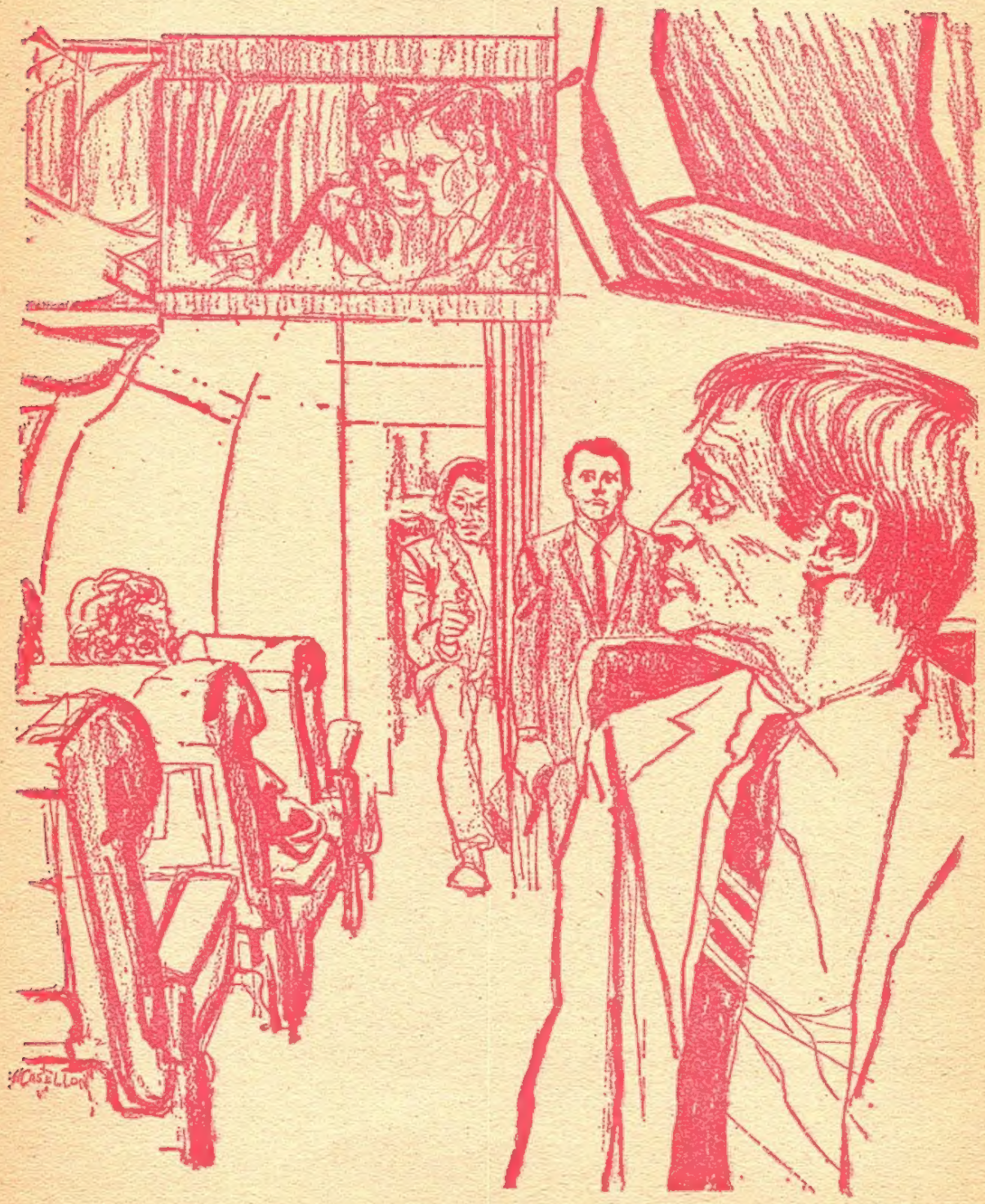
FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN



the speaker system about their ETA Hong Kong.

Solo was dressed in his usual dapper style. Except for the pieces of sticking plaster on his chin and neck, there was no evidence that he had been down on all fours the night before, fighting for his life against a pack of THRUSH uglies in a foul Bangkok slum.

One of the girls hovered, for a second time in sixty seconds.

"More champagne, yes?"

"Yes," said Illya Kuryakin from the aisle seat next to Solo. He held up his glass, smiling.

"No," Solo said. His face was serious, but not his eyes.

"Come now, Napoleon. We're entitled to a bit of celebration. With that Bangkok cell—" Illya made an expressive gesture, which effectively transmitted the idea: dead and buried.

Solo smiled at the stewardess. "I just don't want to cost these sweet young ladies their jobs. I don't know what it is about you, Illya, but you do draw them."

The stewardess stared straight into Solo's eyes, rapt. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"I happen to be very thirsty," said Illya.

"All right," said Solo. "Fill us up, dear. But fast, before the other passengers notice."

He passed his glass. Immediately, several people who had been craning around to see who was getting all the attention buzzed their service buzzers. The stewardess fled as the great Air Pan-Asia jet hummed down the sky toward Hong Kong.

Solo sighed, content. "You know, Illya, I was just thinking. This is a splendid way to end an exciting—"

Up at the front of the compartment a lady screamed.

The cockpit door thudded open. Simultaneously there was an explosion, like a muffled gunshot. A man cried out.

The entrance to the sacrosanct cockpit was a confusion of blue-uniformed arms and legs. Solo's midsection chilled. He slipped his right hand beneath his faultlessly cut jacket. THRUSH had attacked in stranger places.

But even as Solo tried to untangle the visual pretzel-puzzle of struggling men in the cockpit entrance, he was bothered by the realization that THRUSH would hardly launch an attack with this sort of fanfare—

Abruptly a man came hurtling out of the tangle at the cockpit entrance. His mouth hung open. His eyes were large, round, brown. His black hair and his airline uniform were mussed. He was an Indian or a Thai, Solo judged.

Illya tensed forward on his seat, his hand now buried in his coat too. The flight officer stared, baffled, blank-faced, out over the passengers. Then his left hand flew out. He caught the curtain which

screened off one of the lavatory doors.

It was not enough support. Down he went, twisting slowly. A dreadful silence had fallen over the compartment.

As the flight officer twisted around, the back of his shirt became visible. A wet, spreading color swatch stained it.

"Shot in the back," Illya breathed. The cockpit door slammed and latched loudly.

For a moment more the stunning effect of what had happened gripped the compartment. A stewardess from the rear economy compartment came running up. Two of the forward compartment girls were on their knees in the aisle beside the gunshot man.

The new stewardess ran halfway to them, saw what had happened, and fainted on top of a passenger.

"That helps a ton," Solo said grimly. "Illya?"

The slightly-built, pensive-faced U.N.C.L.E. agent needed no further suggestion. Illya moved from his seat and started down the aisle. Napoleon Solo came right behind him. All at once the starboard wing of the giant jet dipped toward the South China Sea.

The Air Pan-Asia plane went into a sharp banking turn. Solo and Illya steadied themselves on the headrests of two seats.

"Changing course," Solo said. "Very fast—probably without authorization."

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

"An air kidnaping," Illya whispered. "It has happened before."

One of the girls kneeling beside the wounded man was going into hysterics. "Help me get her out of the way," Solo said over his shoulder to Illya. The younger agent picked up the girl bodily, deposited her on the lap of a stout, middle-aged Japanese woman who was blinking rapidly as tears of terror streamed down her cheeks.

"Help her," Illya said to the Japanese woman. "Keep busy. You won't worry so much."

Napoleon Solo was already kneeling next to the semi-conscious flight officer. The man lay on his side in the plushly carpeted aisle. He gripped the leg of the passenger seat nearest him. Solo glanced over at the other stewardess.

She was the one who had intended to serve them the fresh champagne. Thank God she was able to control herself. Her pretty Eurasian face had whitened and her hands shook, but she had a grip on herself.

"Who is this?" Solo asked. "The pilot?"

"No. Mr. Han, the co-pilot," the stewardess said.

Solo gently probed the man's shoulder. "Mr. Han? We'll try to get this plane back on course and get you medical attention." Han signified that he heard.

Illya crouched down. "Judging from the location of the bloodstain, the bullet might not necessarily be fatal. Loss of blood, however—that is another matter."

"What happened up front?" Solo asked. "Han? Can you answer?"

"They—without warning—turned on me," Mr. Han breathed. "Men I have known for several years. They had—guns. Without any warning. I asked Captain Loo what was the curious—money belt affair which I saw beneath his flight jacket when—he opened the jacket. They stared at me. I knew something was peculiar—asked again. I reached for the belt, only—only curious—and they had guns—" The co-pilot's shoulders jerked as a spasm wrenched him.

"Both of them with guns?" Solo said. Co-pilot Han barely nodded.

Napoleon Solo glanced once at Illya. The young agent with the mild face and bowl-like haircut pulled his flat black and deadly looking U.N.C.L.E. pistol from the concealed holster under his jacket. Solo did likewise.

"It's probably locked," Solo said, rising slowly. All at once he was moving, stepping across the wounded man. He jammed his shoulder against the cockpit door and wrenched the handle with his free hand.

From inside the cockpit came a low, nasty crack. Solo threw himself back flat against the lavatory wall. Directly next to where he had been standing, the cockpit door showed a small round bullet hole.

Solo whipped his head around. The passengers were crying out, weeping, hugging one another. Solo saw nobody with a wound. Had the bullet damaged the pressurization system? What were the damned fools in the cockpit up to?

"Well," he said to Illya. "We know one thing."

"Yes?"

Solo grimaced. "The door's locked."

At precisely that second, the new madness began.

The interior of the aircraft grew gloomy, as though a curtain had descended. The transformation was instantaneous, from the sun-sparkling brightness of day to murk. The giant jet gave a lurch, another. The windows streamed with rain.

A bluish flare lit the interior. This was followed by the most shattering drum-roll of thunder Napoleon Solo had ever heard. The plane seemed to rocket upward, then drop sickeningly. Passengers rolled in their seats, side to side.

"Where did that come from?" Illya said. "Didn't the pilot announce—?"

Solo barked, "Yes. Just before

this all started, he announced perfect weather in every quarter of the sky. Not a cloud. Perfect weather." The faces of both men were drawn. Solo expressed it for both of them: "I've never known a pilot to fly into a storm deliberately."

"Unless he wanted to destroy an aircraft," said Illya.

"Maybe. But I've never seen a storm like this, either."

Solo stared past the terrified passengers. There was little to be seen. Great dark clouds boiled past. Another lighting bolt flared. The entire starboard wing seemed to glitter and dance with eerie radiance. The big aircraft shuddered. Thunder pealed.

The stewardess who had been kneeling beside the wounded co-pilot had enough presence of mind to find an emergency control of the compartment lights. She turned it on. The lights flickered briefly. There was a whine, a smell of ozone. Another loud thunderclap rocked the aircraft. The lights went out.

Even the relatively calm stewardess began to show signs of breaking. She gripped Solo's arm.

"I don't know who you are, carrying those—" The girl's trembling hand indicated the long-barrelled weapons the U.N.C.L.E. agents were holding close to their bodies. "—but if you can, use them. Do something about those insane men in the cockpit. I tried to call the cockpit from the galley intercom. They have cut off communication."

"And they're apparently set on sending this plane down," Solo said.

"It can't take much more of this," Illya said.

Napoleon Solo sensed this was true, felt it with each great heaving of the great jet. The wings groaned. The compartment ceiling creaked. The ozone smell was increasing as the ventilation system failed. A seam slowly widened in the compartment ceiling, suddenly buckled open for a good eight inches of its length. Up above the panelling there was a display of blue, shooting sparks.

"Are we in a typhoon?" Solo asked the stewardess.

"Wrong season. And such violence at this height? I've never known it—"

"There's something diabolical about it."

Solo's head banged against the lavatory wall as the plane gave another sickening buck-and-drop. "The storm came up too fast, all too fast. Almost as though somebody threw a switch—"

The moment the words were out of his mouth he felt foolish. It was impossible to control weather that way.

An ill-defined, crawling sensation gripped him. Illya's fingers on his arm pulled him back to reality. Already the jet engines had acquired an odd, low-pitched sound, full of ominous groanings.

"Napoleon," Illya said, "we hardly have time to stand around beating our gums. There are two men in that cockpit intent on destroying this plane in this storm, whatever the motive. I suggest we suspend meteorological discussion and do something."

Solo said, "Right." He bent down, tapped the heel of his left shoe.

Its surface slid partially aside. He palmed a small, dough-gray pellet. He kicked his heel on the rug to re-seal the closure. Then, ducking low, he headed into the narrow aisle leading to the cockpit door.

He could hear nothing from the other side of the door. The roar of the storm, the sound of the aircraft shaking itself apart were too deafening. He jammed the doughy pellet against the cockpit door and leaped back, shoving the stewardess to one side.

Illya had already jumped the other way, gun up, ready. He and Solo had worked together long enough to need next to no communication in times like this.

With a boom louder than the thunderclaps the door blasted off its hinges. Acrid smoke billowed into the compartment. Solo barked, "Now!" He and Illya jammed into the narrow aisle and went through the smoke into the cockpit.

ACT I
GREEN IS THE COLOR OF A DEADLY PLACE

THE COCKPIT of the Air Pan-Asia jet afforded little room for maneuvering. Napoleon Solo lunged through the smoke and found himself practically up against the pilot's chair.

Illya came crowding in behind him. The two men at the controls turned, rising up. Their faces were distorted out of the bland patterns of composure which Solo typically associated with flight crews on Oriental air lines.

The pilot was the more squat of the two, a heavy-framed, short man whose brush-cut black hair sparkled with sweat-drops in the dim green gloom of the instrument-lined chamber.

The pilot's lips peeled back. His pudgy right hand had a pistol in it. He aimed at Solo's stomach. The airliner bucked and plunged upward. Solo's squeeze of the trigger seemed to take an eternity.

Outside the front cockpit glass, oily black clouds boiled toward the aircraft and went whipping away past the radar nose. Time seemed

to slip into slow motion. The trigger finger of the pilot went white, whiter—

A double crack as the pilot fired and Solo did too. Something ripped the shoulder of Solo's jacket. Behind him, metal clanged. From the lavatory, there was a splintering of glass. The pilot crumpled.

The flight engineer had swivelled round in his chair and now had a snub-nose small-caliber gun pointed at Illya's head. As soon as Solo fired, he whipped his right hand over. The muzzle of his pistol came chopping hard onto the flight engineer's wrist.

The snub-nose gun made a noise. Illya jerked to one side. He aimed at the flight engineer's left shoulder and shot once.

In seconds the dual had begun and ended. Solo's chest ached from the smoke, his stomach from the nauseating tossing of the cockpit floor under him.

The storm burst around the great jet in eruptions of lightning. Some of the explosive smoke had cleared away.

"Drag them out of their seats!" Solo shouted. It was necessary to shout. The storm noise was a continuous tympani roll from the sky. Passengers screamed. The engines whined; sparks from short-circuited wiring back in the passenger compartment crackled a sinister warning.

The flight engineer lay on the cockpit floor. Blood from his shoulder seeped into the ridged channels of the flooring.

Illya pointed his gun muzzle at the plane's control panel. "What do we do about those?"

Approximately seven thousand lighted dials with eccentrically jerking needles seemed to confront Napoleon Solo. One glance told him that he would never be able to fly the aircraft. A two-engine executive jet which U.N.C.L.E maintained on Long Island was his limit, and he had only piloted that a few times in emergency situations.

"I might be able to take it over," Illya yelled above the roar. "But only if the weather weren't so bad, and we could contact a control tower to talk me through the procedures—"

The pilot and the flight engineer out of action made the situation look hopeless. Solo wished he had not been so prompt to shoot. But would either of the renegade officers volunteer their services if they could, even at gunpoint? He doubted it.

Solo peered back through the murk into the passenger compartment. "Stewardess! Is the co-pilot awake?"

"Barely, sir. You had better come find a life belt, because we we will surely go down in another moment."

"The devil we will," Solo replied. "I've got an insurance payment to make next Tuesday. Get a bottle of your champagne and pour it down

Mr. Han's throat. Tell him that Blue Cross will take care of him in Hong Kong, but right now he's got to fly this plane."

"Napoleon," Illya said, "you are impossible. Perhaps that is why you so often accomplish it."

Solo's mouth whitened at the edges. "Do you think I think this is hilarious? I'm trying to keep the few people who are still sane on this plane from tearing each other's throats. Unless we can get out of this storm—"

Like punctuation, another crackle of lightning burst outside the rain-flooded windows. The immense jet tilted downward, with the tip of its port wing pointing toward the South China Sea. The stewardess had gone stumbling back along the aisle to the galley. Solo met her over the prostrate form of the co-pilot.

Mr. Han's eyelids flickered open and shut. He seemed to realize that he was needed. He tried to lift himself on his right elbow.

Kneeling, Solo propped him up. He tossed the champagne bottle to Illya, who thumbed the cork. A white foamy squirt sprayed across a couple who were silently praying. Solo tried to keep everything else out of his mind except the necessity to prop up Mr. Han and get the bottle to his lips. He could feel the accelerating downward plunge of the plane in his viscera.

Han swallowed the champagne in great gulps. "Instant courage," Solo said. With his help Mr. Han lurched to his feet. The back of his uniform was bloody from shoulder to belt. Solo and Illya helped him forward to the cockpit.

They settled Mr. Han in the pilot's chair. He groaned, swayed. Then he jerked himself to attention and blinked at the controls.

Later, Napoleon Solo decided that they probably would have crashed had he not remembered something Mr. Han had said about Captain Loo's odd looking money belt. Solo left Han staring blearily at the controls, unable to comprehend them because he was having enough trouble simply keeping upright in his seat, Illya tried to steady him as Solo crouched in the semi-darkness of the instrument-lit cockpit.

The flight captain's eyes were rolled far up in his head in death, shining like little moons. Something shiny-black gleamed beneath his flight blouse, where the bottom two buttons had come unfastened.

With shaking fingers Solo undid the rest of the coat buttons. He fanned back the pilot's lapels. Around his middle Captain Loo wore what indeed looked like a fat money belt of tough black vinyl. Solo prodded the belt.

Solid. As though a number of small steel units like cigarette cases had been sewn inside the vinyl carrier. Solo's hand brushed across something hard which protruded from the unit located at about the

position of Captain Loo's right hip.

Experimentally Solo felt around a bit more. The device, which he could not see in the extreme shadow behind the pilot's chair, felt like an ordinary wall switch.

Under his breath Solo said, "Here goes probably everything," and threw the switch over to the opposite position.

What happened in the next half minute left Solo and Illya slack-jawed.

First the pelting rain seemed to lessen. The violent down and updrafts buffeting the airliner grew less formidable. In a matter of fifteen seconds they stopped altogether. The thick black clouds began to shred apart. It was all so fast that it beggared belief.

Napoleon Solo stared at Illya. Illya stared back. Both of them stared down at Mr. Han.

The co-pilot was talking to himself in what sounded like Thai. He had a sick, pained grin on his face. He had touched two controls, two switches, thrown them, and the aircraft's response had been satisfactory.

Han raised his head. He started. "What has happened to the storm?"

Ahead of the radar nose, blue sky appeared, then the tilted horizon of the South China Sea. The malestrom vanished behind. Sunlight flooded into the cockpit.

Now Illya could see what Solo had been doing down on the floor. He spotted the toggle device. Mr. Han let out a modest whoop, coughed violently, recovered, and repeated his question about what had happened to the storm. This time there was near-hysterical happiness in his voice.

In reply, Illya said, "I believe Mr. Solo has switched it off."

The full impact hit Solo. He stared down at the vinyl belt wrapped around Captain Loo's thoroughly dead midsection. He said, "My God in heaven."

Mr. Han was finding his way out of his pain daze and into the routine of disaster procedures for the giant jet. The emergency and fire systems soon controlled the worst of the damage. Three engines were operating at full power. Mr. Han shut down the fourth and the plane began to fly steadily again through the untroubled blaze of sunlight and sea.

Under Han's direction, Illya operated the radio. Soon they had ghostly voices from hundreds of miles away to help them. In the passenger compartments, the general hysteria was being controlled by more champagne.

Solo lit a cigarette and sucked the smoke deep. It would have been a relative piece of cake the rest of the way to Hong Kong if his gaze hadn't been pulled back time and again to that mysterious series of steel cigarette-case units around the dead pilot's waist.

Solo wanted to experiment. He wanted to throw the switch back

again. He didn't. Why push for trouble?

They would have it in quantity, once that black belt reached New York and made its damnable, diabolical presence felt at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

TWO

THREE DAYS later there were several peculiar occurrences in a certain nine square block area in Manhattan's East Fifties.

The news media reported them. The commentators closed their broadcasts with them, usually making a joke. The United States Weather Bureau was powerless to explain them.

The peculiar occurrences were a series of black, furious rain showers accompanied by thunder, lightning, and high velocity winds. Each storm lasted five minutes or less. The storms encompassed only nine square blocks.

But it was hardly a coincidence that the affected area contained an unbelievably modern complex of offices and research facilities concealed behind a front of decaying brownstones.

Within this complex, in the laboratories manned by scientists of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, tests of the black belt were going on. On a 24-hour priority alert basis, U.N.C.L.E. was attempting to ascertain an answer to the question, What hath THRUSH wrought?

High up in the chamber with the motorized revolving conference table, the planning room for U.N.C.L.E.'s Operations and Enforcement section, three men tried to pry loose some additional pieces of the puzzle from a reluctant fourth.

Mr. Alexander Waverly looked hale and well rested, although he hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. Solo and Illya both looked hung over.

Solo's fine linen shirt was rumpled and gray. Illya sat with his feet up on a desk, a vitamin pill in his hand. He tossed the vitamin pill up and caught it, tossed it and caught it, while Mr. Waverly tapped his forever unlit pipe against the sill of the window overlooking the panorama of the East River and the United Nations Building.

Solo had been doing the questioning for the past quarter hour.

"Your name is Chee," he said. "Alfred C. Chee. We know that. We have a file on you. You're not a Thai, You're Chinese. You were with the Reds for a while after the takeover. Then later, you joined

THRUSH in nineteen sixty-two as second echelon supervisor for the Ranjiranji cell. But apparently your pilot's training was too valuable. The last listing shows you were transferred to Strategic Logistics and Operations. Listen my balky friend—"

Solo grabbed the shoulder of the man seated stiffly in the straight chair. "It's all on the computer and your undistinguished, not to say disgusting, face is on our microfilm. Now we've got food and you haven't. We've got cots to rest on and you haven't. So you'd better start talking."

Mr. Waverly cleared his throat. "I might also remind our guest, Mr. Solo, that when more civilized methods of interrogation fail, we have chemical agents designed to immobilize the will and liberate the tongue."

"He means," said Illya, "we'll stick you with a needle. You'll betray THRUSH anyway. Why not get it over with? You've stalled long enough."

"Thirty-six hours," Solo said. "I'm getting damn sick of it."

"Temper, Mr. Solo," said Waverly.

"Temper, hell. We've gotten nothing out of this fourth-class Fu Manchu since the flight from Hong Kong landed. I vote to skip the drugs and try something ethnic, like bamboo shoots under the nails. Mr. Waverly, we can't waste days and days exchanging pleasantries. This man and his machine almost killed a planeload of people."

The man in the chair was the flight engineer of the Air Pan-Asia jet.

He had been given a clean pair of trousers, shirt and other clothing. U.N.C.L.E. physicians had dressed his shoulder wound with fresh bandages. He looked ungrateful and slightly truculent over the whole business. He was a slender, sallow-skinned Oriental in his middle thirties. His lips were compressed primly. His black eyes shone with that fleck of fanatic resistance Solo had learned to recognize as the hallmark of the captured operative of THRUSH.

"Talk," Solo said.

"My name," the man said, "is Flight Officer Hiram Wei. I am so listed on the personnel roster of Air Pan-Asia Incorporated. My flight officer's certificate shows that I was born in Canton in 1929, of an English mother named—"

"Stow it," Solo interrupted. His face was red with fury. He'd had more than enough.

Mr. Waverly gave his pipe a final knock against the marble sill. A pastel phone rang. Mr. Waverly walked past the giant, light-flecked face of the huge computer and answered.

"Um. Oh. Ummm." He took an experimental chew at the stem of his pipe "Very good, Rolfe. Expect you in an hour. What? That big, eh? Remarkable, remarkable.

Yes, I saw that particular newscast. I gather the Mayor was rather upset about the unexplained weather phenomena you fellows caused in the neighborhood. Can't be helped, can't be helped. Thanks, Rolfe. Appreciate the extra hours and all."

Mr. Waverly hung up, swung round.

"That was the laboratory," he said, primarily for the benefit of the THRUSH agent. "We have concluded our initial tests of the components of the device discovered aboard your plane. While we waited for our laboratories to finish the preliminary phase we had a certain latitude in this interrogation. Now I'm afraid we must begin to put the parts together, and rather quickly. Will you talk?"

With composure the flight engineer regarded his hands folded in his lap.

"My name is Flight Officer Hiram Wei," he said. "I am so listed on the —"

Mr. Waverly sighed, a sigh befitting the heavy decisions which fell to a man so highly placed in U.N.C.L.E's policy and operations section.

"Obviously drastic measures are required."

Illya said, "I have a nice set of brass knuckles which I confiscated in Athens"

Solo grinned. "The knuckles, Mr. Waverly?"

"The drugs, Mr. Solo."

THREE

THREE HOURS later, Solo, Illya and Waverly waited in a short, aseptic corridor

The corridor was situated one flight below the planning room. Dim, hooded little bulbs burned along the baseboards in either direction. At either end the corridor ended in double swing doors. It resembled a wing of a private hospital which, in fact, it was.

Solo pinched the bridge of his nose. He glanced at his watch. Illya stood across the hallway. In his right hand he held a drum of magnetic recording tape. Abruptly the swing doors to the right opened.

A long grotesque reflection was cast out ahead of a rubber-wheeled hospital cart. The attendants in white pushing the cart seemed to take forever to wheel it down to the door where Solo impatiently was jigging from one foot to the other.

"Are you having some sort of internal upset, Mr. Solo?" Waverly asked. He appeared exhausted. Pouches showed under his eyes.

"Well, sir," Solo said, "it is getting late. And there's this girl, sir. Her name is Bernice. A charming thing. She'll only be in Manhattan one more night. Since we've already heard the tape of what Chee said while he was under the drugs, I thought maybe we could wait until tomorrow to pursue this matter."

Mr. Waverly knocked his cold pipe against the wall. "No, Mr.

Solo. We are going to proceed from here to the audio-visual conference room."

"Oh." Solo sighed as the cart squeaked up on its big wheels. "Bye-bye, Bernice," he said under his breath.

Waverly spoke to the physician attending the cart: "Dr. Bailey, how soon will Mr. Chee recover?"

The physician glanced down. Under crisp sheets, Alfred C. Chee, flight engineer, lay asleep. The doctor said, "He should be out from under most of the fog in an hour. Will you want him again?"

"In the audio-visual conference room, under maximum guard," Waverly nodded.

"I'm afraid the questioning didn't pull much out. Obviously he doesn't know enough to be useful."

"On the contrary, on the contrary," Waverly said, dismissing the cart. It rolled into the gloom of the small, neatly-furnished recovery bedroom. Waverly enjoyed the looks of puzzlement on the faces of Solo and Illya. He said, "Come along, gentlemen. You may think the tape we made of Mr. Chee's babbling was worthless, but you are not in possession of all fragments of the mosaic. I have one more bit to add, in the audio-visual room. Until today, I confess I didn't know what to do with it."

Illya said, "About all this tape contains is the information that Alfred Chee was a THRUSH agent placed on station eighteen months ago in his cover post as a flight engineer. He was based in Hong Kong and told to wait. He received his first orders only one week ago Friday."

The elevator doors opened. Solo thought one last time of Bernice and followed the others inside. As the doors closed he said, "But Illya, that does reveal one other thing, sort of by implication."

Illya hooked up an eyebrow. Solo continued: "It indicates the priority THRUSH assigned to the testing of the weather control apparatus. Chee was to get into place, hold his cover and, apparently, let nothing else disturb it pending the test. Last week he finally received the components—the switch belt which Captain Loo, also of THRUSH, was to wear around his waist, and the black generator box we found stowed in Chee's luggage when the plane landed at Hong Kong."

The elevator doors opened again. The men moved down a long corridor walled in stainless steel. Recessed ceiling lights blinked blue, amber, red, in signal patterns. Through an open doorway a teletype chattered. A girl spoke into a microphone.

"But actually, the sum of our information is that THRUSH has perfected a dreadful weapon," Illya commented as they entered a large room off the corridor.

Shutting the door, Mr. Waverly said, "Well, Mr. Kuryakin, thank

you for grasping that point. Perhaps it will lessen Mr. Solo's concern about his cancelled amours."

Waverly swung round beside a highly polished board room table. "I believe it is quite apparent from the report which Rolfe brought to us, just before we followed Chee into the operating theater, that an enormous peril is posed by this new discovery of THRUSH research. Control of the weather is a weapon ruthless men have dreamed about for centuries."

"I understand the danger," Solo said. "Under the cover of a man-made storm like the one produced from the jet, a cadre of THRUSH people could move in and take over virtually any city in the world. There'd be no defenses. People would be too busy finding cover, caring for their dead and wounded, trying to prevent looting—" Solo's voice trailed off. Pictures of the possible carnage flicked in his mind like images thrown by a slide projector. None was pleasant.

"We must discover the source of this THRUSH breakthrough," Waverly said. "How far along is the development of the device? Does the mission of Chee and Loo—which was to be a suicide mission if necessary, as Chee revealed under the drugs—represent an early test? What will be the next test? An entire city? Is every THRUSH satrapy now equipped with such a generator? Or if we locate and wipe out the research unit, will we have cut off the rooted tree before it grows to full size?"

Waverly cleared his throat. "We must operate on the assumption that the generator is a research project only. We will prove the truth or falsity of our theory only by locating the research center responsible for the machine."

Waverly turned to a console. He pressed one of many colored studs. A rheostat began to reduce the light level. Soundlessly, an ultra-wide screen descended from the ceiling on the far wall. Illya slouched in a deep leather chair, smoking. Solo paced.

"About that damned generator itself, sir—" he began.

"You heard Rolfe's report."

"Yes. They're sure downstairs that the generator will produce violent weather on command, but they're not sure how yet."

Waverly nodded. "Rolfe is wary of using destructive testing to analyze the components, the belt and the black generating box found in Chee's luggage. Since those are the only samples we have, tearing them apart must be done with utmost caution."

"That also means it will be some time before the laboratory people discover a way to counteract the ion reversal which Rolfe thinks is at the heart of the process," Illya said.

"Um." From the underside of the gleaming table, Waverly took a small microphone from a carrier re-

ceptacle. He pressed a button beneath the tiny mike grid. A red light on the wall glowed. "Stand by to let me have the aerial photos, will you, Jacques?"

There was a disembodied, "Right, sir," from a concealed loudspeaker.

"I have brought you two here," Waverly explained, "to offer you the one additional piece of the mosaic which is in U.N.C.L.E.'s hands. It came through while you were returning from Bangkok. We routinely receive unusual aerial reconnaissance material from the various governments banded together to support U.N.C.L.E. What you are about to see was culled from a batch I received while you were on the other side of the world.

"The photos were taken by an aircraft similar to the American U-2. It was flying a routine patrol mission. Normally the weather in the region photographed prohibits clear photography, which is why views like these have never shown up before. Now the only other facts Mr. Chee revealed on that tape which Mr. Kuryakin is holding were what again?"

Solo frowned. "He didn't know the man who brought the weather equipment and the sealed orders to Hong Kong."

"But the man was a THRUSH agent," Illya said. "He knew the code."

"He was Oriental," Solo said. "This may tie in later."

Silence. Mr. Waverly sucked on his pipe stem.

Illya said, "Isn't that all?"

"Is it?" said Waverly.

Furrows formed on Solo's forehead. Then he remembered. "Chee's contact mentioned a rough flight. And something about Nepal, I think."

"Nepal," murmured Waverly. Into the mike again: "The photos, Jacques, please."

A series of full-color aerial shots slid one after another across the screen. There was an oval area in the center of each photo. The area glowed darkly green. It was surrounded by sharp, brown-and-slate topography, splotched here and there with white.

"A valley," Illya said. "And a very fertile one, from the looks of it."

"Surrounded by—that can't be!" Solo said. "Those are mountains with snow on them. No valley so green could exist at such an altitude, so close to such big peaks." Solo turned toward Waverly. "There must be some distortion, sir. The valley must be far below those mountain tops."

"On the contrary," Waverly said. "Photo analysis confirms that the peaks and the bottom of the valley are less than a quarter mile apart."

Illya snorted. "A fertile valley at the snow line? Where on earth—"

"In Tibet," said Alexander Waverly.

Solo jumped up so hastily he

dropped his burning cigarette on the carpet. He snatched it up, talking all the time: "These photographs were taken over Tibet, Mr. Waverly?"

"To be specific, Mr. Solo, over the Himalayan mountain range, the highest mountains in the world. Cold, frozen mountains. Of course no fertile valley could exist at that altitude, Mr. Solo. Unless, of course, one could control the climate."

Mr. Waverly thanked Jacques on the microphone, re-hooked it beneath the table and tented his fingers. The rheostat brought the room light up to normal again. "I expect the significance has dawned on both of you by now."

"The THRUSH contact's reference to Nepal—" Illya said. "Nepal adjoins Tibet."

"But Tibet is in the hands of the Red Chinese!" Solo said.

"Quite right," Waverly agreed. "Do you suppose that would make any difference to THRUSH? They have sold out the worst as well as the best in their insane determination to build a supra-nation. Why not operate in Tibet if it suits their purpose? Perhaps they have recruited some Chinese assistance. Why is that so unrealistic? The fanaticism of the Chinese would fit perfectly into their scheme of things.

"In fact, I can think of few worse adversaries than a Communist Chinese who has renounced his old masters and joined the intellectual monsters who control THRUSH. Most civilized people consider the Red China the most destructive and imperialistic nation in the world today. THRUSH makes the Chinese look like kindergarten toddlers by comparison."

Solo swallowed. "What's our move?"

"To try to send agents along the route from Hong Kong to Nepal, and thence into Tibet."

A chill descended. Solo's backbone crawled. Penetrate Chinese-dominated territory and discover a THRUSH outpost? The peril would be exactly doubled. Before he could comment, Waverly went on:

"That's my purpose in having this man Chee brought back here as soon as he recovers. We will place him under the control of our hypnotic compounds, so that he will be amenable to whatever we suggest. We will buy him a plane ticket to Hong Kong. You two gentlemen will be on the next plane. We will let Mr. Chee be seen in his usual haunts in the Crown Colony. Before very long, I imagine, there will be THRUSH agents sniffing after him, to find out what went wrong with the aircraft test.

"After all, THRUSH cannot have gotten a very authoritative report. They cannot know fully how the flight turned out, since we managed to neatly quash any reference to the storm in the Hong Kong newspapers. They should be most

anxious to contact Alfred Chee when he reappears. When that happens, you two gentlemen will follow those who contact him."

Napoleon Solo was about to say something sardonic. High up on the ceiling, a bank of square, previously dark inlaid panels flared red and began to blink in sequence.

Illya jerked his head up, staring at the blood-hued lights.

A hidden loudspeaker barked, "Immediate red alert! Immediate red alert!" A siren began to warble. Waverly snatched up the mike.

"Give me the Central Board." A pause. "This is Waverly. Where's the trouble?"

"The medical wing," came a voice. "Unexplained explosion. All primary communications systems have been knocked out. We're trying—hold on, here come the back-ups."

"Plug me in with the wing," Waverly ordered.

Solo and Illya tensed by the door, checking over their long-barrelled pistols. There was another rattle of noise. As the back-up communications systems cut in, the audio-visual room filled with an amplified confusion of voices crying out in pain. Solo heard fire crackling, sirens warbling, walls collapsing. Waverly shouted for Dr. Bailey. Finally he answered:

"Here—here, sir. Chee woke up. The search units missed one thing. He had a high-intensity explosive cap on one of his teeth. He used it

to blow half this floor to pieces the minute we left him alone. We thought he was still sleeping it off."

"Are you all right, Doctor?" Waverly said.

"Yes. Two of my interns got it, though. Killed by the blast. There's fire everywhere, but the sprinklers are on. We'll make it. The prisoner's loose."

"In which direction?"

"The express elevators leading to the basement level."

Illya snapped the slide on his pistol. "Let's go, Napoleon. If Chee discovers the underground channel leading to the motor launch dock at the East River, we've lost him."

Both men charged out of the room.

"Waverly!" came Dr. Bailey's voice. "I heard that. Tell Solo and Kuryakin to be careful. I'm willing to bet that if the prisoner had one tooth with an explosive cap, he had at least one more. Two is usually standard for THRUSH agents."

Under the blinking blood-colored lights, Mr. Waverly looked wan.

"It's too late, Doctor. They have already gone."

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO and Illya Kuryakin raced through the corridors, pistols drawn. Other U.N.C.L.E. agents, responding to the red alert, crisscrossed the halls, then disappeared behind stainless steel doors which shut and sealed themselves and would not open again until a specified signal removed the alert.

Out of breath, the two agents reached the express elevator bank. Two sets of doors were recessed in the wall. Solo pointed to the indicator board above the closed doors.

"That one's in the basement already. If the alert signal had come a second or so sooner, we could have caught him between floors. Use your keys on the over-ride board, Illya."

Illya was already at work. He inserted one key and then another into the silvery-dull cover of a metal box set in the wall between the elevators.

Tumblers rattled faintly. The cover sprang open. Illya threw a toggle within the box.

At once the indicator lights above the right-hand elevator began to wink. The over-ride system had restored power. Within a few more seconds the men were riding downward again.

Neither spoke.

Finally the elevator stopped. Solo and Illya flattened against the side walls of the car, pistols ready. The doors opened.

Illya slid forward to the front of the car. He shifted his long-snouted pistol to his left hand. He used his right to press a button which locked the car doors to full open. Solo peered around the edge of the opening into the hallway.

In most respects the corridor resembled the one they had just quitted, stories above. The walls shimmered and reflected each other like dull steel mirrors. Recessed light banks, but fewer of them, blinked every dozen yards in the ceiling. Not so many doors opened off this corridor. And there was a faint but pervasive scent of salty, open water.

The corridor was empty.

"He must be down here," Illya said. "Each floor is sealed during an alert."

"He's here," Solo whispered back. "I'm getting the message from my spine. Let's go."

Solo's neck prickled as he and Illya stepped into the tomb-like hall. Like perfectly oiled machines, one of them whipped around to the left, one to the right. They swept the gloom with the muzzles of their pistols.

The doors of the other elevator stood open. Bright fluorescent light

washed out over the concrete floor. But the car in which Chee had ridden down was also empty.

They began to walk. Their footfalls clicked and echoed, eerily. The ceiling lights flashed blue, amber, vermilion, coloring their faces with harlequin patterns. Solo licked his lips. A feeling that they were being watched increased.

His scalp tingled. His belly felt tight. Somewhere, in this corridor their quarry waited, hidden. The ceiling angled downward as they reached the halfway point between the elevators and the massive steel doors which led to the underground quay and the private channel.

Illya's eyes ranged the corridor. "This is impossible, Napoleon. All the doors are sealed, the elevator is empty, and no one has gotten through those steel lovelies blocking the exit to the river." He craned his head back to stare at the ceiling. At this point it was barely three feet above their heads. "I don't see where our elusive friend could have got to, unless he ascended to heaven as a cloud of ectoplasm. I would have sworn—"

Barely whispering, Solo said, "Quiet. He's watching us. From that vantage point you mentioned. Don't turn! Keep staring at the river doors. Something just registered. At the place back there where the ceiling began to slope, I noticed a patch of shadow on the floor. One of those light bays in the ceiling is out of commission."

Illya's eyebrows quirked up, understanding. Each of the bays consisted of three large, square panels set in a line across the ceiling from wall to wall. Still playing the game of pretending that his interest was centered up ahead, Solo went on, "The only trouble is, we told him which way is out."

"But he has no over-ride keys," Illya said. "And he can't possibly be armed."

Sweat trickled down the back of Solo's neck to his collar. "You're right. We'll take him on the count."

Slowly Solo whispered out the numbers. On the spat-out three, both agents turned. Instantly Solo spotted the dark ceiling square which his subconscious had only noted before. Repair crews had apparently pulled all the wiring guts from the center light box a few yards back. The translucent cover which fitted into the frame flush with the ceiling was gone. Up in the barely man-sized space recessed into the ceiling, a shadow stirred—

"Chee?" Solo called. "Chee, you haven't got one chance. Get down, or—"

A shrill, ear-hurting shriek made Solo start. The THRUSH agent had been wedged up into the recess, using the pressure of his backbone and his heels to hold himself in concealment. Now he let out another wild scream as he dropped. He tumbled on the concrete, sprang up. Solo knocked Illya's rising arm aside:

"Don't kill him! His hands are empty—"

Strictly true. But in spite of this, Chee was not behaving like a trapped man. He had his fingers in his mouth, pulling and yanking at his teeth as though one ached. Then his spittle-shining hand whipped out from between his lips. There was a wild, crooked grin on his face as he threw hard.

The two U.N.C.L.E agents dodged instinctively. Something small and white whizzed past them, and pinged against the great steel doors. Instantly, deafening sound, raw heat, gouts of fire and billows of smoke swirled around them.

The explosion's force hurled Solo against the corridor wall. Chee stumbled, off balance, keeping up that maniacal, demoralizing shrieking. Chee pelted past them through the smoke, which was already beginning to leap and swirl as fresh currents of air struck it.

The salty aroma of the East River washed over Solo as he jerked Illya along in pursuit.

Alfred Chee had already leaped over the wrecked remains of the great doors. His shoes clicked rapidly out in the darkness.

Solo and Illya could see little. The underground channel which led in from the East River under an arched concrete tunnel opened into a far larger, tear-drop shaped basin at this end. Three to four powerful motor launches were customarily anchored there. Only one at a time could pass from the tear-drop through the narrower channel. And the channel's river end was being blocked now. The explosion had activated other alarms.

As a metallic squawk came raucously from a speaker overhead, a grille of thick iron bars descended at the channel's far end. It was visible to Solo because its pattern stood out against the city lights on the river's opposite shore.

Somewhere in the dark down by the tear-drop marina there was a clunk of feet hitting decking. Then a heavier slosh of water as one of the fast launches took the sudden weight of Alfred Chee jumping aboard.

Solo ran to the left, out of the jagged frame of light created by the ruined doors. Illya followed. They flattened against the concrete wall, listened.

Water lapped out by the launches. Chee laughed. It was a low, unpleasant sound, smacking of lost sanity.

"We have to rush him," Solo whispered.

"I can't see a thing except those lights on the river," Illya said.

"Hang on for a second. Your eyes'll adjust."

"I hope he doesn't have another of those exploding molars conveniently fastened in his head. If he threw one right now, we'd be two very—"

A white spot of light bloomed out by the marina. It widened, blasted

Solo's eyes with its glare. Suddenly Illya and Solo were circled in brilliance. Chee had found the spotlight on the launch.

Solo leaped out of the light, zigzagging wildly as he ran. Illya went the other way. The spotlight whipped back and forth wildly, searching for them. Finally it hit Illya, and stayed on him.

Then the thing which Solo feared happened. The THRUSH agent discovered the swivel-mounted machine-gun mounted near the spot.

A stuttering roar filled the dark. Tracers left orange trails as the bullets ripped the wall in the center of the spot-lighted circle. Illya had thrown himself face forward just in time. Now he leaped up, started to run. The spotlight swiveled. The machine-gun stuttered evilly. Illya wrenched out of the way again, wincing as cement dust driven up by the bullets stung his eyes.

Chee was operating the searchlight with one hand and the machine-gun with the other, Solo, guessed. He started a reckless run forward. Illya was jumping back and forth like a madman. The light followed him.

Solo poured on the speed, heedless of how much noise he was making. Shielding his eyes at the quay's edge, he made out the shape of another launch moored between the quay and the launch from which Chee was firing. He tensed, jumped, landed on the nearer deck with a thud. Chee heard the noise.

Around came the searchlight and the machine-gun muzzle. The searchlight blinded Solo. He used his thumb to set the pistol on automatic fire. The gun bucked and barked in his hand as he fired into the heart of the light and kept firing, moving his aim slightly to the right.

Glass broke. The searchlight element sizzled and sparked and went dark. Alfred Chee screamed.

In the echoing confines of the secret marina, the machine-gun noise lingered long after the gun itself had stopped. The weapon swung gently on its upright mount, creaking.

Solo and Illya jumped aboard the second launch a moment later. Illya produced a pocket torch. He shined it down on Chee's blood-flecked shirt, then up to his lifeless face. Chee's mouth was open. Two of his teeth were noticeably shorter than those alongside.

"Mr. Waverly won't be happy about this," Solo said.

"Mr. Waverly was not down here the last few minutes."

"Well," said Solo, though he sounded rather dubious, "I guess you have a point. But I wouldn't bet on it."

The interior of the U.N.C.L.E morgue was chill, blue-lit, uncomfortable. Solo shivered. Mr. Waverly dropped the white sheet over the corpse of Alfred C. Chee.

An attendant rolled the slab back into place and latched the

locker door. Mr. Waverly's breath clouded as he said, "His death is regrettable, though I suppose you had no alternative. But now it is impossible to execute our plan to have you follow his contact route from Hong Kong. Therefore—"

Mr. Waverly sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid you'll have to take the more dangerous route into Tibet. By parachute."

"Tibet!" said Solo. "By *parachute?*"

"Why, Tibet's practically the end of the world!" Illya exclaimed.

"It may well be just that for all of us, if you fail," Mr. Waverly said soberly.

ACT II
WORLD'S END THIS WAY, TWO MILES

DAWN ARRIVED with chill magnificence.

In the east the snowy crests of the Himalayan peaks slowly glowed golden. The light rose behind the peaks and spilled down the western slopes, but it did little to relieve the stark, basalt severity of the landscape. Napoleon Solo groaned and thrashed in his bedroll.

His bones ached with cold. The rarified air stung his lungs. But he was getting used to it.

Five hours had passed since he and Illya jumped from the hatchway of the disguised cargo plane into abysmal blackness and the howling slipstream . . .

At the top of his lungs, Solo had raised the same question he had been raising ever since he discovered, back at the secret U.N.C.L.E. airstrip outside Macao, that it was to be a night drop:

"I hope you people know what you're doing." The wind tore his words away as he hung in the cargo plane door, fat in his para-suit which contained appropriate disguises and weapons. "I don't see anything down there but a big black nothing."

"We would regret landing atop Mount Everest by accident," Illya shouted.

The U.N.C.L.E. jump-master was a swarthy, jolly Portuguese from Macao. He showed his gold teeth. "Be assured, gentlemen, this aircraft has been equipped with the finest of computerized sensors. You will be dropping on to an open plateau between major peaks. The plateau is at least three miles across. Perfectly safe. You will land but a few miles from your target areas. Everything is in order."

"And U.N.C.L.E. always sends flowers if it isn't. Very comforting," Solo said, and jumped.

The ache in Solo's right ankle had not lessened very much. He stuck his right arm down into his bedroll and rubbed. They hadn't landed on one of the peaks, true enough. But Solo had conked against the side of a sizeable boulder, and twisted his right leg as he slid down the boulder's side.

They had made their camp inside a ring of boulders, on a slope which was the beginning of a majestic peak. Illya was already working a short distance up the slope, burying his parachute and jump suit in the shale with a trenching tool. Solo enjoyed the comparative warmth of the bedroll a moment longer. Then, with a nothing-for-it groan, he tumbled out.

Soon he was working alongside Illya, burying his own gear.

The younger agent finished. He tossed the trenching tool into the shallow depression remaining and covered the tool by pushing more shale on top of it with his hands. When Illya stood up, Solo was grinning.

"What's so comical, may I ask?" Illya's breath shot out in a cloud as he spoke.

"You. If you wore a get-up like that in New York, you'd get arrested."

Illya glanced down. He was clad in crude goatskin shoes, which were simply bags pulled up around his ankles and tied with cord, and an ankle-length garment, much like a brown maternity costume, made of yards and yards of coarse wool. A rope cinched it in at his middle.

On his head he wore one of those curious ear-flapped pieces of headgear peculiar to Tibet. His face, hands, and in fact every inch of him, were dyed to a walnut color. The U.N.C.L.E. plastic surgeons had even managed to slant his eyes a bit, and wrinkle his skin so that it had a rough, wind-roughened texture.

"May I remind you, holy father," Illya replied sarcastically, "that I am not the only one in the crowd in this outlandish get-up. I have played many strange parts in my time. But never one like this. If we can actually pass as Tibetan holy men, I'll be surprised. Probably the first Red Chinese soldier, peasant or THRUSH agent who sees us will call for our arrest while laughing himself into hysterics."

"Well, that's the way the prayer wheel revolves." Solo finished burying his gear. "Shall we dine and be off down the Yellow Brick Road?"

"I'm glad someone's cheerful," Illya said. They sat munching their field biscuits. These dry, flaky, utterly tasteless items were concealed, along with an assortment of weapons and other necessary gear, inside special pockets sewn into the voluminous material of their robes. Solo felt as if he was weighed down with lead. It didn't help his throbbing ankle.

Illya crunched the last of his biscuits. He stood up and brushed crumbs off his hands.

"I always thought Tibet was exotic. Chiming temple bells. Ronald Colman in brocade discovering the secret of eternal youth. Lowell Thomas riding into the sunset on a yak. This is a wasteland."

So it was. The plateau across which they now began to tramp

showed no sign of human habitation. Vegetation was sparse and gray. They moved down from the slope and reached a faint symbol of civilization, a rutted road winding across the plateau. It came from behind them and stretched ahead, most of its course invisible because frequently twisted out of sight behind big rocks.

The sun climbed higher. The wind whistled incessantly in their ears. Even with the sunlight, they were cold.

"Are you sure we're going in the right direction?" Illya asked after twenty minutes.

Solo pulled a compass from his robe. The needle danced and steadied.

He nodded.

"The bearing checks. Besides, there isn't any other road. The instructions said go south. We're supposed to come to a crossroads, and meet our contact there. Let's keep walking and see if we can't get into the spirit of the part. Practice internal tranquility. Think uplifting thoughts."

"In the middle of several hundred thousand Red Chinese soldiers and sympathizers?" Illya asked. "Very funny."

Solo's teeth chattered. The landscape was so savage, so empty and ringed around by those incredible peaks with cruel snow-spear tops, that he wanted to keep talking to keep their spirits up.

"It shouldn't be much further to—" Solo was saying, when he saw Illya freeze.

"Napoleon, listen!"

Illya whipped around, stared back up the road.

Scowling, Solo lifted one of the earflaps of his hat. He heard it. A motorized growl.

With the skirts of their lama robes flapping wildly, they dived toward the side of the road. The rumbling and growling grew. Illya tripped on the hem of his robe. He fell, letting out an explosive, "Damn!"

The gray-painted hood of a heavy truck appeared around a bend in the road.

Solo grabbed Illya's shoulder and dragged him bodily over the shale, into cover. And with hardly a moment to spare.

A second truck appeared behind the first. Then a third. The trucks were massive, gray, at least ten years old. They clunked and lumbered at a slow speed. Each had a big open bed to the rear of the cab. Solo peered cautiously from behind a rock as the lead truck drew abreast of their hiding place.

The driver of the truck had a flat, yellow face. He wore an olive uniform cap. The bed of the truck was jammed with Chinese soldiers. Rifles and pistols bristled. A tall officer stood spraddle-legged just behind the cab. He was scanning the landscape through field glasses which hung from a cord around his neck.

As the truck rumbled by, the officer let the field glasses fall.

Solo sucked in a breath. A slender white scar made an S-curve down the left side of the officer's face, from hairline to jaw. Altogether it was one of the cruellest faces Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

Barely even whispering, Solo said to Illya over his shoulder, "If we're lucky they'll go on without—"

Suddenly a soldier in the first truck pointed and tugged at the officer's sleeve. The officer raised his right hand. He barked a command in Chinese. The brakes of the truck squealed.

Solo's eyes grew grim. The truck had stopped not ten yards away, just a little way past their place of concealment. The officer was leaning over the side slats of the truck bed. He was staring at the shale where Illya had stumbled and fallen.

The officer's face animated with a sudden, cruel pleasure. He pointed to the all too visible marks in the loose earth. The soldier who had called attention to them nodded.

The officer began chattering more commands.

The soldiers in the truck unshipped the tailgate. Two soldiers jumped down, then two more. The officer scanned the boulders to the left and right of the hiding place of the U.N.C.L.E. agents

"Well, it was a short trip," Solo said. He snaked out his pistol. So did Illya.

Cautiously the soldiers advanced to the place where Illya's fall had left traces in the shale. There they halted, rifles at the ready.

The officer still stood gripping the top slat at the side of the truck. His expression was one of delight, anticipation. Then he appeared to grow annoyed at the timidity of his men. Shouting in Chinese, he waved them forward.

Straight toward Solo and Illya the soldiers shuffled slowly.

Hot breath hit Solo in the back of the neck. Something wet and cold nuzzled him. He jerked his head around, as did Illya. The younger agent's eyes popped. He opened his mouth to let out an involuntary yell of surprise. Solo clapped his free hand over Illya's face and stifled the cry just in time.

Somewhere on the other side of the huge rock the boots of the soldiers crunched, coming closer.

And closer.

A huge, horned, hairy yak, the Tibetan wild ox, had wandered out of the rocks behind the U.N.C.L.E. agents and now stood with its forepaws planted beside Solo. The yak's large moist eyes regarded the interlopers with curiosity. The animal nuzzled Solo's face again with its damp, chilly snout.

The yak nuzzled Solo's other cheek.

"I think it likes you," Illya breathed.

At the back of his mind Solo was listening to the tramp of the boots of the soldiers. Surely they had reached the boulder by now. In another second they would round the rock and find their quarry.

What would happen when the shooting started? Could he get a shot past the yak's head? Doubtful. The damned thing kept sniffling and snuffling at him as though he were a long-lost relative. Solo also expected that the first shots would startle or anger the yak. Probably it would pick him up on its sharp, glittering horns and that would be that.

On the other side of the rock, the soldiers were whispering to one another. The yak's huge, sandpapery tongue licked Solo's cheek affectionately. Solo glanced desperately at Illya, who reached up and slapped the yak lightly on its hairy flank.

The yak reared back and trumpeted. The soldiers beyond the rock let out startled cries. The yak kicked up its rear hoofs, snorted, put its horned head down and went charging out toward the road.

Solo and Illya peered out again. The yak was lumbering toward the truck, driving the Chinese soldiers before it. As the animal ran, it kicked and scattered the shale. Just this side of the truck the yak stopped. It swung its head from side to side as if assessing the odds. Then it uttered one more low-register complaint, and clattered off among the rocks.

The scar-faced officer looked unhappy. The mystery of the disturbed shale had been explained to his satisfaction—and regret. He jabbered irritably in Chinese, ordering the soldiers back into the truck. As soon as the tailgate was in position, the officer banged his fist four times on the cab roof. The truck rolled forward. The angry officer began to scan the landscape again with his field glasses.

The other two trucks followed. When the last vehicle had vanished, Solo stood up and dried his damp cheeks with his sleeve. He was, he discovered, shaking.

They waited ten minutes, inserted their hands in their sleeves, bowed their heads and began to trudge along the road once more.

TWO

FIFTEEN minutes later they followed the road around a singularly large rock. The plateau be-

yond was relatively level. Just ahead, a second rutted road intersected the one on which they were walking. This other road ran at right angles to the first. On a slight slope near the crossroads stood a collection of small sod huts. Their roofs were thatched with long, dried yellow strands of coarse grass or weed.

Several long-haired goats wandered near one of the buildings, which had a large open doorway.

Near the buildings, a person in black pantaloons, fur-lined boots and coat and a conical basket-weave hat was working a particularly unproductive-looking patch of ground with a primitive hoe.

Solo's right hand gripped his pistol, out of sight inside the left sleeve of his robe. He and Illya advanced cautiously. At the edge of the patch of ground they halted, faces impassive under the deep coatings of dye.

The person with the hoe stopped working and turned. Napoleon Solo did a mental double take. The person was a girl, with a wide, appealing mouth and charmingly Oriental dark eyes. In spite of the woolly fatness of the coat she wore, it was possible to see the distinct and charming outline of a well-shaped bosom beneath. Solo bowed ceremoniously.

"May the god shine his face upon you," he said, though not in the local tongue. Solo spoke Interlingua, the international scientific language.

"He has done so already," the girl replied, also in Interlingua. "And he has caused a double blessing to rain in white billows from the heavens—"

"—on to the place where the earth blooms despite a wintry blast," Solo completed the code.

"Father? Father!" The girl ran toward the hut nearest the crossroads. Abruptly she wheeled around. "Oh, I'm sorry. Please come in." She hurried inside, calling, "Father, they've come."

Solo and Illya entered the rude-walled home. A fire burned brightly on a crude hearth. An elderly Tibetan with a seamed yelow face rose from a table and bowed. Like the girl, he wore heavy dark pantaloons, a fur-lined coat and boots. Although his hair and small beard were pure white, his cheeks glowed with vigorous color and his eyes were alert.

"Welcome, welcome to both of you," he said. He extended his hand, American-style.

"I'm Napoleon Solo. This is Illya Kuryakin."

"I am Ah Lan," said the old farmer in fairly good English. "This my daughter Mei."

The beautiful Tibetan girl bowed.

Ah Lan indicated several crude benches.

"While we warm ourselves at my humble fire of yak dung chips," he said, "my daughter will provide us with some kumiss, made of fer-

mented mare's milk. You will find it most palatable."

Mei brought the men earthenware cups containing a hideous-looking liquid. Solo glanced at the stuff and his stomach turned over.

Solo took a sip and fought a wince. "Delicious, delicious." He drank no more.

But Illya tossed off the whole mugful in a series of gargantuan gulps, smacked his lips loudly and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Ah Lan looked delighted. Mei began to direct her admiring glances Illya's way.

Ah Lan immediately called for a refill for Illya, who was valiantly repressing a belch. Mei poured more of the drink from a goatskin with a spout. Solo smirked in delight as Illya forced himself to drink heartily again.

"You came from the sky in parachutes," Ah Lan said. "Thus I was informed by the short wave radio which I keep concealed in my humble stable to the rear. Truly, the arm of the U.N.C.L.E. is long."

"So are the talons of THRUSH," Solo said

"How far is it to the valley?" asked Illya.

Ah Lan's face darkened. "The Valley of Ten Storms lies but seven or eight miles away. A day's trek under favorable circumstances. However, the way is very difficult."

"I suppose because THRUSH guards it well?" Solo said.

"No guards are needed," Mei put in. "During this time of the year, the only land route into the valley lies up the mountain at the far side of this plateau. There is a pass which is nearly impossible to negotiate because of the violent blizzards prevalent at this season. My honorable father and I have only reached the top of the pass once. We nearly froze to death before we were able to make our way down again."

"Pleasant prospect," Illya muttered, holding his dark-stained palms to the fire.

"How do the THRUSH people get in and out?" Solo wanted to know.

"I believe there is an airstrip within the green valley," Ah Lan replied.

"But you'll guide us through the pass?"

"Though the way is hazardous," Ah Lan said, "I will." His expression grew thoughtful and sad. His eyes were turned toward the small, bright flames. "When members of the THRUSH organization came to this plateau, a year ago, they came disguised as Red Chinese soldiers. There was no airstrip in the valley then. It was a frozen waste. The THRUSH organization moved all of its construction and scientific equipment across this plateau by truck, on the very road which passes outside. They hauled the equipment over the pass in the spring season when the weather is most mild.

"At that time—" Ah Lan's voice dropped "—at that time I was blessed with two daughters. One day, while I toiled in the fields with Mei at my side, a truck load of THRUSH construction engineers stopped at this humble cottage. My other daughter was alone. The THRUSH men were full of drink. They fell upon her and—"

Ah Lan shuddered. His eyes reflected the dancing fire with fire of their own.

He went on:

"My daughter was dead when I returned with Mei. From that moment, I dedicated myself to the destruction of the evil forces which turned the Valley of Ten Storms from a wasteland of ice to a green and fertile hell. Yes, Mr. Solo, Mei and I will guide you. And this time we will go with you through the blizzards into the valley. We are both familiar with the use of automatic weapons. Perhaps we can be of assistance."

"Well," Solo said, "I'm not exactly sure what our plan will be once we get into the valley. But our mission is to find and destroy some sort of laboratory THRUSH has set up for the purpose of controlling weather."

Ah Lan nodded. "I assumed as much. Technology, not magic, has melted the ice within the valley and caused the rice fields to blossom with green shoots. Such a weapon should not be allowed to remain in the hands of devils such as these."

Illya stood up. "How soon can we get started?"

Ah Lan said, "In the morning—"

A rumble filled the room. Ah Lan paled. Mei ran to the door. She spun around, frightened.

"The trucks are coming back. They passed a while ago, traveling in the opposite direction and the soldiers searched here. The Chinese radar station in the mountains must have detected the plane from which you parachuted last night."

Once more she glanced outside. Solo and Illya were on their feet, guns drawn. The rumble increased.

Mei gripped the door frame tensely, watching.

After a long moment she relaxed.

"They are going on."

"It is only a temporary respite," said Ah Lan. "A terrible journey awaits us tomorrow."

THREE

IN SINGLE file, the four of them struggled upward through knee-deep snow.

They had departed from the crossroads at first light, encountering no more Chinese soldiers enroute. The first few hours hadn't been difficult. The terrain was rocky, sloping upward, but footing was sure. Gradually, however, conditions grew worse as they climbed.

Light veils of cloud began to drift around them. The clouds obscured the pale sun. The last vege-

tation vanished when they reached the snow line. The snow began to deepen and the wind intensified. For the past hour the snow had been up to their knees. And there seemed to be little immediate prospect of relief. Up they went, up and higher.

On either hand rose immense and stark walls of rock, their tops lost in clouds of whirling, billowing snow. Solo realized that they must be in the pass proper. But how long it would take them to reach the crest, he didn't know. He stumbled ahead, kicking up great gouts of the white stuff.

The wind screamed.

The snow began to take on a grayish cast. Solo wondered if his eyes were going bad. He had a recurring vision. He saw a sumptuous, oversized bed in a tropical resort hotel. Angrily he shook his head to drive the vision out. If he fell prey to that sort of hallucination, he was in trouble. It would be all too easy to lie down in the snow and forget everything.

Blinking again, Solo halted this side of a deep drift. He peered around. No sane man would believe the time of day was noon.

The vista before him was one of unrelieved white-flecked gloom. The wind howled so loudly the effect on the ears was like sitting on top of an operating fire siren. Solo realized abruptly that he had lost sight of Mei's fur-clad figure ahead.

He could see nothing except snow and the sheer walls on either hand.

He lifted his fur-wrapped right arm and tore the rags from his mouth. The snow struck his bare face with little needles of pain. He shouted the name of his companions. Only the howling wind answered.

With much twisting and writhing, he managed to get his hand beneath the various layers of snow clothing which Ah Lan had provided. He located the butt of his pistol within the folds of his lama robe. He pulled the pistol out into the snowy air and fired it three times.

"That'll bring them." He stuffed the gun away and pulled on his mitten.

Soon, Napoleon Solo concluded that he had committed a grievous error in judgment. Instead of the shouts of his friends coming to his rescue, he heard a sinister rumbling overhead.

The rumbling grew louder. Solo looked up, shielded his eyes. His gut tightened. The echoes of the shots bouncing back and forth between the rock walls had dislodged a small avalanche. Even as Solo stared, practically hypnotized by the awful sight, several thousand tons of the stuff came hurtling downward toward him.

Solo threw himself backwards. An instant later a huge, wet mass slammed down onto him like a white sledgehammer. The world rocked and roared.

Solo clawed and sputtered. Snow surrounded him, buried him. He fought upward like a swimmer. The snow pressed against his face, weighed down on the back of his neck.

With a herculean lunge, he fought to its surface.

A few large chunks of snow crashed down like oversized projectiles. One whizzed past Solo by a margin of about two feet. The force of it dug a deep, deep hole in the drift holding him prisoner.

Suddenly a furry figure appeared, crashing and lurching toward him. Two others followed. More gigantic snowballs cascaded down. The rocky walls of the pass shook.

Illya, the old Tibetan and his daughter reached Solo, knelt, seized his arms. Illya shoved him to his feet. Ah Lan dragged Mei toward the far wall of the pass, crying:

"Seek shelter, quickly! The avalanche is coming!"

Like people demented, they ran, floundered, leaped, and crawled as best they could. They reached the pass wall and huddled against it as the air filled with thousands of great balls of snow. The balls suddenly solidified into a curtain of the stuff. Solo wrapped his arms around the trembling girl and pulled her head down against his chest.

Presently the white cascade stopped. The old, less alarming shriek of the blizzard returned. Ah Lan raised his seamed face and pointed. "The gods in their infinite mercy chose to protect us."

The others looked up. A triangular ledge jutting from the rock above their heads was all that had saved them from being buried alive.

All of them were panting and floundering at an abysmally slow pace when Solo suddenly realized that the going had become easier.

He shouted, "I think the snow's sloping downward. Yes, look. The clouds have thinned up ahead. I see sunlight."

Ah Lan managed a smile. "The worst is behind."

Their speed increased as the snow became less and less deep. Now it was possible to see the slate walls of the pass in sharper detail. The wind dropped off. Only a few snowflakes danced before their faces. And a breeze from a different quarter seemed to be shredding the misty gloom which had enveloped them for so many hours.

Solo and Mei tramped faster, Illya and the old Tibetan close behind. Shortly blazing sunlight struck their faces. The sky overhead spread frosty blue and cloudless. Illya tossed away the rags around his parka hood as Solo circled some tumbled boulders and pulled up short, gasping.

"Now I believe it," he said as the others crowded wearily up behind him. "There really is a Shangri-La."

FOUR

THE FOOTHILLS of the peaks dropped gently away toward sparkling green rice fields. A bird sang somewhere. Trees bent in a gentle wind. Wind-ruffled water gleamed. Directly below them was some sort of orchard, the fruit-laden trees standing in neat rows. It was an altogether idyllic and beautiful scene, marred only by several structures far out in the center of the valley.

These were low, black-painted buildings of stone. Several had no windows. Others had a few, and resembled barracks. Behind this complex an airstrip bisected the lush landscape like a raw concrete wound.

"They don't take siestas in Tibet," Illya said. "Where is everyone?"

"I believe many of the laboratories and facilities are underground, Mr. Solo," Mei said. She had thrown back her parka. Her dark hair shone like a sleek bird's wing.

The look she gave Solo was warm and worshipful. Illya made a resigned face.

Grumpily Illya climbed out of his two sets of coats and trousers. He stowed them behind a rock and adjusted his priest's robe and headgear. In a moment the transformation of the whole group was complete. They were now two priests with darkly-hued faces and slanted eyes, plus an elderly farmer and his daughter.

They crouched behind rocks while Solo surveyed the valley with field glasses which he had taken from his robe. "That big building close to the far end of the airstrip looks like a hangar. But I still don't see a single human being anyplace."

"It will be too dangerous to attempt to approach during daylight," Ah Lan said.

Solo nodded. "But there's enough cover for us to go as far as that orchard. From there we can watch till nightfall."

Ah Lan peered toward the black barracks-like structures. "Surely our entrance to the valley cannot have gone unobserved. Yet it appears that it did. As my daughter told you, much of the facility is believed to be built under the earth. Perhaps THRUSH feels itself so secure that guards are unnecessary."

"We'll find out after dark when we try to get in the place," Solo said. He sat down against one of the tree trunks. "Right now we might as well rest. The fun and games in the snow made me tired. Illya, how about breaking out some more of those crumbly crackers? You'd think U.N.C.L.E. could afford better fare for—"

A chill went all the way through Napoleon Solo as a sliding panel opened in the trunk of the tree directly across from him.

Other panels snapped open in all

the other tree trunks around them. Rifle muzzles appeared in the openings. Mei jumped into her father's arms with a cry of horror. Illya's jaw hung down in untypical amazement. Solo whipped his gun hand toward a fold of his robe.

"That would be inadvisable," said a voice from the largest tree in the lane.

The whole side of the trunk opened outward like a door. Through the door walked a tall man in the peaked cap and smart, tight-fitting black uniform of the officer elite of THRUSH.

The man had a large automatic in his right hand. A slender white scar traced an S-curve down the left side of his cruel face, hairline to jaw. It was the Red Chinese officer from the truck.

"You folks certainly switch sides fast around here," Solo said.

"Not at all, Mr. Solo," said the officer in English. "My loyalty has but one fixed point—THRUSH. Of course I know who you are. The cameras hidden in several imitation pomegranates hanging on these trees have already supplied your photographs to our technologists just there."

The officer used his gun to indicate the black buildings in the center of the valley. "Our computers have analyzed the photos and sent back your names. Mr. Napoleon Solo and Mr. Illya Kuryakin of U.N.C.L.E. These two traitors—"

The officer's cruel expression turned lascivious as he studied Mei. She huddled against Ah Lan. The old man's chin came up, defiant. The officer smiled.

"—we are familiar with them, too. They shalt be dealt with."

"Since when does a Chinese nightingale turn into a THRUSH?" Illya asked.

The officer shrugged. "Actually, it's a most convenient arrangement. I have access to information from

all the Chinese radar installations in the district. You see, we have been expecting visitors from U.N.C.L.E. ever since our experimental flight on Air Pan-Asia apparently met with failure due to your meddling.

"You were observed in Hong Kong taking Mr. Chee aboard the flight for the United States. So we have been preparing. As senior officer in charge of the district beyond the pass, I receive immediate reports of all unidentified aircraft in our airspace. Thus I was reasonably certain you had arrived by parachute two nights ago.

"Of course I was forced to carry out the charade of searching the terrain with the truck convoy. A pretty predicament! I knew you were hiding behind those rocks be-

side the road. I saw the marks in the earth. But one of my soldiers also saw them, so I was unable to overlook them. Fortunately the wild yak happened along to explain away the marks and give me a legitimate excuse to call a halt to the search."

The scarred officer stepped two paces forward, to allow room for the other THRUSH soldiers who were appearing from the door in the tree. There were six of them, a squad, all in black boots, trousers, blouses. They carried rapid-fire machine pistols with large, round infra-red snooper sights mounted on top.

They were a mixed lot, typical of THRUSH forces: two appeared to be European, one English or American, and three Oriental. All of them had the flat, featureless expression of the professional assassin.

"Are there any more questions before it is my turn to be inquisitive?" the officer said.

"Yes," Solo said. "You didn't take us prisoner yesterday because you wanted to save us for THRUSH. Isn't that a pretty risky business?"

The officer looked amused. "In certain quarters it might be. Here it is not. This region of Tibet is sparsely populated. It is even more sparsely garrisoned by the Chinese army. Since I am in command of the area, my orders are executed without question."

Illya gestured at the valley, the peaceful, sun-dappled rice fields. "How do you convince your Chinese friends to leave this place alone? After all, observation planes from the Chinese air force must have spotted it."

"Naturally," the officer said. His tone indicated the question was naive. "Again, by deft maneuvering, all Chinese military units within a certain radius have been convinced that this valley is actually a highly secret research installation which is true—operated by the Peking regime—which is not true. We manage to maintain the fiction."

Solo shook his head. "From Mao to THRUSH. That's quite a transformation."

The officer's lips curled. "We find the Chinese contemptible milksops."

The officer jerked his gun muzzle down the hill. "I believe we have wasted enough time. Shall we go?"

"Preferably to hell," Solo said, diving his hand under his robe for his pistol.

The odds were hopeless. As Solo dropped into a fighting crouch and levelled his gun, the THRUSH squad swarmed forward. Machine pistol butts thudded against his skull, into his midriff, onto the back of his neck. Solo swung a punch and hit nothing but air. A THRUSH soldier kicked him in the belly.

Solo went down on his knees. A rabbit-chop drove him flat. Other soldiers rushed out of the tree door to seize Illya, Ah Lan and Mei.

A little line of blood ran out of the left side of Solo's mouth as he sprawled on his back in the warm, fragrant orchard. The officer loomed above him, S-scar shining white. The officer placed the hob-nailed sole of his boot on Solo's Adam's apple and pressed down.

"That was a damned fool trick," said the officer. He smiled thinly. "I can see by the expression on your face, Mr. Solo, that you are surprised I speak your language."

"Yes," Solo grunted.

"It's quite simple. I was educated in your country. At U.C.L.A."

Solo said, "I should have guessed."

For his sarcasm he got another forty pounds of pressure applied to his throat, hard.

ACT THREE
SO SORRY, MARK TWAIN

THE FOUR prisoners were taken to one of the black buildings. An elevator shaft carried them an unknown distance underground. They were led down a corridor to a huge chamber equipped with computers, control consoles, and a dozen television monitors with fifty-inch screens.

Generators hummed. Technicians in THRUSH smocks busied everywhere. As their captors prodded them forward, Solo noticed that several of the monitors which cast a pale, eerie light over the vaulted rooms showed scenes in the valley. But three of the screens contained views of buildings and a harbor which Solo could identify.

"They're interested in Hong Kong for some reason," he whispered to Illya.

"No talking!"

The officer with the S-scar hit Solo in the lower backbone with a swagger stick. Solo ground his teeth together. That particular nasty was going to be dealt with before this affair was finished.

His attention was diverted to their destination, a large, open area in the center of the humming chamber. The focal point of the area was a spacious work table. Two objects sat on it. One was a dully shining vinyl-covered belt, of the sort the renegade pilot had worn. The other was the belt's companion equipment, a black generator box.

A disconcerting difference hit Solo then. This black box was three times the size of the one discovered in Alfred C. Chee's luggage.

Hovering over the apparatus were two men. One was bony, horse-jawed, with thin gray hair over an elongated skull. He had Occidental skin coloring but slanted eyes. His hands fluttered restlessly at his waist. He peered through thick spectacles as the officer marched the prisoners up to the table.

"Ah, Major Otako! Well done, well done," said the man with spectacles.

"Thank you, Dr. Dargon. We had no difficulty. I trust, sir, that you and the general will turn them over to me as soon as you are finished with them. I would consider it an honor to be allowed to dispose of two lickspittle servants of U.N.C.-L.E. and their treacherous guides. I assure you the liquidation will be conducted in proper style."

"Yes, yes; you're expert at such things," said Dr. Dargon. He giggled.

His companion walked, or rather appeared to ooze, forward. He was Chinese, with a bald, shining pate. He weighed close to four hundred pounds. The white planter's suit which he wore resembled a tent. His four yellow chins all but hid his necktie.

The jolly fat man's look was deceptive. Solo knew it the moment his gaze met the Oriental's blubber-socketed eyes boring into his.

"It will not be long before your services are required, Major," the huge man said. He spoke in an asthmatic wheeze, resting the palms of his hands on his immense paunch. "You are Solo and you are Kuryakin, eh? Well, I have heard of you both. Perhaps you have heard of me also. General Weng, at your service. Forgive me for appearing in mufti.

"I am about to depart from Hong Kong to conduct a major test of this

apparatus you see before you. I will be taking off from the airstrip within the hour. But I did not want you to arrive without being properly greeted."

General Weng moved round the table. His right hand closed over Solo's forearm. Through the wool of the holy robe, the fingers cut viciously into Solo's flesh. He had to fight to keep his face from cracking with pain. General Weng increased the pressure.

"After all, Mr. Solo, it was you and your associate who disrupted our first full-scale test of the storm machine."

"Well, I'm sorry about that," Solo said. The pain from the pressure of the fat fingers brought dizziness. With a gasp Solo added, "It's just that I've always had this silly thing about thunder and lightning—"

Illya recognized Solo's plight. He raised a diversion: "How does it happen, General Weng, that an officer so highly placed in the Red Chinese regime becomes a tool of THRUSH?"

The general released Solo, who rocked back on the balls of his feet, pale. The general held his paunch once more.

"Long ago, Kuryakin, I realized that the so-called plans of the Chinese leaders for world conquest were ill conceived. Mao is an addlepated poet surrounded by weaklings and sycophants. They will destroy themselves. They are not to be taken seriously. THRUSH, on the other hand, will achieve its goal of total domination."

"If you don't think the Chinese are serious," Solo said, "I'd hate to hear what you're cooking up."

Dr. Dargon sucked noisily on one of his pointed front teeth. "By all means tell him, General."

The general laid his hand on top of the generator box. He stroked it with an almost sensual pleasure. "I am sure the significance of our current plan will be lost on these two peasants who have been duped into aiding you, Mr. Solo. But perhaps you and Kuryakin can appreciate it. Two important nations in the Asian bloc have recently found their relations menaced by rising tensions. A number of border incidents have resulted. Skirmish fire between their troops. A few deaths on each side. The tensions have increased to the point where war threatens. Such a war could plunge Asia, and the entire globe, by escalation, into a holocaust."

Illya's expression was unpleasant. "Horror makes you THRUSH people so cheerful."

General Weng chuckled and held his paunch. "Naturally. THRUSH is holding the high cards."

Solo noticed that Mei had regained her composure. With her father's arm around her waist, she digested Weng's remarks. Solo was in the dark about everything except the need to escape. He got busy

checking the layout of the large chamber.

A railed concrete ramp led upward from the floor along the one wall. Two THRUSH guards with full battle dress manned this exit, over which a red bulb flashed intermittently. The prisoners had been brought down a similar ramp on the room's opposite side. As far as Solo could tell, the command center had no other exits.

Weng peeled back his white suit cuff. He consulted a highly capitalistic platinum wristwatch. "Time is short. You will understand," he said, "that I cannot participate in the amenities this occasion demands, much as I would wish." Weng's small eyes shone with amusement. "Major Otako is competent to handle them, however."

"And I will assist," Dr. Dargon added with a somewhat maniacal cackle. "My work is complete. Oh, yes, finished. My precious—" A pat of the black generator box "—is now in the hands of my co-officer in THRUSH. We have a delightfully effective test planned for this unit. The unit, incidentally, is of triple capacity, considering the one aboard the jet plane as our basis for rating. How fortunate, don't you agree, that we have an opportunity to conduct a large-scale experiment and reap practical rewards at the same time?"

"What are you talking about?" Solo asked.

General Weng feigned bewilderment. "Why, Mr. Solo, don't you know? As students of—not to say meddlers in—world affairs, are you not aware that the two nations I alluded to a moment ago are even now convening secretly in Hong Kong to try to settle their differences around the conference table before Asia is plunged into war? The conferees arrived yesterday in the Crown Colony via ordinary commercial aircraft. They will be meeting in the Hotel Hong Kong International, ostensibly as delegates to the Seminar on Asian Cultural Resources. That is merely a blind, to allow them to hold the conference on neutral territory. We have ways of knowing these things."

General Weng turned to study one of the huge television monitors on the wall. Its camera sent back a sharp picture of the black building above ground, which the U.N.C.L.E. agents had guessed to be a hangar. The hangar door was shut tight. But the screen showed a uniformed figure operating some sort of switch box alongside the great door.

A technician from the monitor board strode up and saluted. "General, your aircraft will be on the ready line in five minutes."

Weng nodded. He snapped his fingers. Two THRUSH men rushed to the table. One was wheeling a steamer trunk equipped with casters. The other carried a bulging suitcase.

The technicians loaded the generator into the trunk. Then they packed the switch belt in among several folded suits of tent-like size. These disappeared as the technician shut and latched the grip. Weng beamed at his luggage, which was colorfully decorated with travel decals.

"Just a happy-go-lucky tourist on a holiday." Weng wheezed with delight and massaged his paunch. "I shall set up our perfected storm generator and produce the most violent weather Hong Kong has ever experienced. Total devastation. The hotel and those at the conference will be destroyed. Then I shall remove certain secret, key parts from the equipment and let the shells be found. They will bear unmistakable markings. When found, the equipment will be immediately identified as the property of the secret service of one of the nations attending the conference. Immediately—" Weng gestured flamboyantly "—total war."

"And THRUSH will be left to pick up the pieces?" Solo grated.

"Yes, isn't that splendid?" Dr. Dargon made unpleasant juicy noises as he sucked his front tooth. His eyes moved like darting fish behind his lenses. "The test will place THRUSH in the position of being able to successfully submit its demands to every government on the globe. Those demands will call for total surrender. And when nations face devastation by hurricanes, floods, blizzards, parching droughts —surrender will be both total and prompt."

The technician said, "General? The aircraft—"

"Yes, I'll be on my way. Good day to all of you. Dr. Dargon, Major Otako, I leave our guests to your tender ministrations."

And, with a potentate's magnificence, General Weng lifted his chin and marched toward the ramp.

Solo sidled near Illya. He hoped to whisper a code word. He had to alert Illya to what he was planning. A desperate course, naturally.

General Weng had already reached the base of the ramp. THRUSH functionaries followed him, one carrying the decal-decorated suitcase, the other pushing the trunk. Each wore a holstered pistol.

The light above the ramp doors changed from red to amber. Then it showed green and stopped blinking. Solo inched closer to Illya.

Major Otako whacked Illya viciously on the right wrist with his swagger stick. "Keep a suitable distance between you!"

Solo would never have a chance to communicate with Illya now. From the corner of an eye he observed the TV monitor scanning the hangar. The screen showed a sleek, unmarked four-engine THRUSH turbo-jet taxiing forward. Solo took the action the moment required.

He spun on the ball of his foot, catching a last glimpse of the mon-

itor camera as it panned to follow the turbo-jet out to the loading ramp.

"Stand still!" Major Otako shouted as Solo moved.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent spun, yanked the swagger stick from the hand of the astonished officer, and bashed him over the nose. Blood spurted. Otako howled and reeled backwards. Solo shoved his hand into the voluminous folds of his holy robe.

The THRUSH searchers had not been quite thorough enough. A couple of items had gone undetected. Solo pulled out one of those now, thumbing the clip on the combination ball point pen and anti-personnel weapon.

A deadly lime-colored cloud of 14-4 tranquilizer gas sprayed over the THRUSH soldiers and technicians who were charging him from the left.

"Down, Illya!" Solo shouted. The younger agent flattened, dragging Ah Lan and Mei with him. Solo kept spinning like a top. The swath of greenish gas trailed around him in a circle.

One THRUSH minion levelled his machine pistol at Solo's neck. He caught a whiff of the gas. He grinned foolishly and fainted away.

Alarm sirens warbled. Scarlet lights danced on the console boards. The huge iron doors to the ramp where the prisoners had entered clanged open. Fresh THRUSH reinforcements charged in, bumbling against one another in their eagerness to be the first to shoot. But the greenish gas had made vision difficult. Solo seized Illya's shoulder.

"We've got to stop that plane! Follow me!"

Quickly Illya helped Mei and a struggling Ah Lan to their feet. He threw his woolly-robed arm across his mouth and nose by way of demonstration. "Cover your faces when we go out through the ring of gas. Now run!" And he followed Solo, who was already charging toward the ramp.

The guards at the head of the ramp sighted their rifles at him. Solo wrestled with the folds of his robe. He had to hold his skirts up with one hand and hunt for what he wanted with the other.

He found it. The rifles of the guards crashed. A bullet whizzed past his head, tugging at the earflap of his hat. Solo flung the globular pellet he had taken from a concealed pocket in his robe.

The pellet went *pong* on the iron doors. Then the ramp heated up to an unbearable temperature. Solo ran straight ahead into the billowing, steamy clouds. Sweat popped out on his face.His cheeks felt parboiled. But in seconds the effect diminished.

Solo pulled up short in front of the doors. They had melted in their frames and now resembled puddles of metal margarine. Both THRUSH guards were dead,

boiled alive by the thermal device. One had stood a bit too close. The white bone of his skull leered.

Beyond the doors the corridor ran on to an elevator. General Weng was struggling with his wheeled steamer trunk and his valise. Finally he crammed them inside. A moment later the doors snapped shut.

Nearer to Solo, the two THRUSH functionaries who had been assisting Weng had turned back. They each went to one knee, sighting their pistols.

Solo tossed his second and last thermal pill. Heat and steam vapor and shrieks of agony filled the corridor.

About to jump over the superheated metal of the melted doors, Solo jerked up short. He whirled.

"Illya?" The shout of alarm was out before he saw what had happened.

On this side of the chamber, the only threats had been the door guards. On the other side, the THRUSH reinforcements were advancing warily toward the greenish fumes which hung like a mammoth smoke ring in the air. Charging through that smoke, Ah Lan had evidently been overcome despite the precaution of holding his arm across his face. He had fallen. In the thick of the smoke Illya and Mei were bending over the prostrate old man.

They were inhaling too much of the gas. Illya staggered. He wigwagged his arm vaguely in Solo's direction.

"Go—on, Napoleon. Can't make it. The old man is—" Illya corkscrewed to the floor, his humanitarian efforts having undone him. Mei collapsed on top of him. The THRUSH soldiers across the room let out a bay of triumph.

Solo remained at the top of the ramp for one tortured moment. In that moment his emotions rebelled against his training. Of necessity, training won. With a choked curse he turned his back on the control chamber and ran.

He tried to wipe the sight of Illya's stricken face from his mind as he pounded up the corridor to the elevator. The sirens wailed insanely.

How much time had passed? Was the plane already taking off? Solo hit the elevator's call switch, waited, prayed.

The THRUSH officers yelled as they charged through the tranquilizing gas, uniform sleeves covering their mouths and eyes. Solo wanted to go back to the chamber, fight and die in the attempt to rescue Illya. Yet he knew that he had no choice but to go the other way. Should General Weng reach Hong Kong with the storm generator, war would be unleashed. Solo had a higher allegiance than that which he owed to Illya. The name of it was U.N.C.L.E.

Machine pistols began to stutter. Solo ducked, dived, dodged. The

elevator doors opened. He leaped inside. Bullets stitched a pattern up and down the rear wall of the cage as the doors banged shut.

Panting, Solo leaned against the side of the elevator. His heart thudded hard in his chest. The elevator rose steadily, humming. Solo worried that THRUSH would cut off the power and trap him inside. But evidently his break had thrown the base into confusion. Sirens still wailed tinnily through speakers in the elevator's ceiling. But the sensation of upward movement did not stop.

Solo tried to organize his thoughts. He had no weapons left. He had to find one, so that he would be armed when he got aboard the plane—if he got aboard.

The elevator stopped. The doors rolled back and sinister sundown light flooded in. Dead ahead Solo saw the turbo-jet on the concrete ready line.

A controller stood on the tarmac near the black-painted nose, wig-wagging with lighted batons. The main door of the fuselage was open. The elephantine General Weng was struggling up a baggage ramp with his suitcase and steamer trunk. The turbo-jet's engines screamed at full rev. Weng's suit flapped like laundry in the prop wash.

All this registered on Solo in an instant. So did the two THRUSH soldiers turning to charge him, bayonets fixed.

Solo sidestepped at the last second. He kicked the soldier nearest him in the backside. The man hit his head on the black concrete wall of the building. Solo seized the man's rifle, spun around and thought of Illya and rammed the bayonet to its hilt in the stomach of the THRUSH soldier still on his feet.

The man wasn't on his feet for long. Solo wrenched the bayonet free. He knocked it off its mount and left it behind, checking the rifle mechanism as he ran toward the aircraft.

The controller with the lighted batons threw them aside. He jerked out a pistol. He began firing as Solo's weird, flapping figure came charging out of the weird reddish gloom.

Up the baggage ramp Solo went, two steps at a time. Just before he jumped inside he heard the controller shout something to the plane's pilot.

The fuselage door closed and locked automatically. Solo blinked in the gloom of the lavishly-appointed cabin. The cockpit door remained closed. There was an odd aroma in the air, coming through tiny ceiling ventilators as the plane began to roll.

On the carpeted floor General Weng lay spread-eagled, unconscious. Solo took a step toward the obese man. The smell from the ceiling ventilators increased. Solo recognized it.

He raised the rifle to try one shot at the steamer trunk. His hands were putty. He could not hold the rifle.

He cursed the THRUSH pilot who had decided on his own authority to incapacitate General Weng in order to incapacitate Solo also. He cursed the THRUSH technologists who had dreamed up the idea of pumping ether through the air system into the plane's cabin. He cursed most of all his own miserable failure, as everything around him took on the blurred motion of a camera in the flash pan.

Slowly Solo spiralled to the floor. With a scream of turbo-jets, the THRUSH aircraft lifted in the red sunset toward the high Himalayan peaks.

TWO

"YOU ARE A very brave girl," said Illya Kuryakin to the pale-cheeked Mei.

"The worst shock has passed," she replied. "My honorable father was advanced in years. His ancestors will make him welcome. And the blow which the THRUSH soldier gave him with the butt of his rifle—"

Mei's lovely face wrenched. "The blow was quick. I pray he felt little pain."

Illya's wrists were already tingling. "How about you? Does it hurt?"

"Not too much."

"Good. Because I am afraid it will get worse."

"You are a very brave person yourself, Mr. Kuryakin."

Manacles had been placed around his wrists. These had been hooked to a chain which hung from the center of the ceiling of a large room. The room was shaped like the interior of a chicken's egg, point downward. It's walls were gray. The lighting was medicinally bright, but diffuse.

A winch had raised Illya so that his feet were a good yard above its floor.

Mei was similarly chained, dangling by her wrists beside him. The THRUSH guards had completed hanging up their prisoners some ten minutes earlier. They had vanished through an oval door in the wall. Illya noticed that the door had thick gasketing all around it. A very tight seal on the chamber boded no good.

A faint electronic hum filled the chamber. Illya twisted his head too suddenly. The effort put additional strain on his arms. The manacles

cut into his wrists and he swayed uncontrollably. He reminded himself not to indulge in that sort of violent maneuver again.

"Greetings, conspirators," said the voice of Dr. Dargon. It was a voice with a somewhat crazed cackle in it. Dr. Dargon was peering at them from behind a thick window in the curved wall. The electronic hum had been the sound of the motor which rolled back the panel covering the window.

Beside Dargon, in some sort of control booth, stood Major Otako. His S-scar shone like a white worm on his cheek. Illya made out two technicians huddled over consoles where small lights flickered in sequence.

"Major Otako suggested that we give you a first-hand taste of our storm apparatus," Dargon said.

"If it's all the same to you—" Illya began.

Filtered through amplifiers, Dargon's voice rasped: "Unfortunately it is not."

"Well, Napoleon Solo got away, and he'll cook your Cantonese hash for you, I promise!" Illya shouted. "What happens to us is of no importance."

"Why must you hurt us?" Mei said. The blood had drained from her face. "Why can't you simply kill us? What can you want from us at this point?"

Dr. Dargon sucked his tooth noisily. The sound carried over the amplifiers. His pig eyes loomed through the double thickness of his spectacles and the control booth glass.

"Why, my dear child, all we want from you is a simple thing." Dr. Dargon pressed his nose against the glass. "We want to hear you say —as the Americans have it—uncle!"

This convulsed Major Otako. Dr. Dargon's face beaded with perspiration. The THRUSH scientist obviously enjoyed torturing people. To one of the technicians he exclaimed:

"Shall we demonstrate our weather control chamber? Perhaps some winds to begin with?"

A ring of concealed panels up near the ceiling sprang open. Gusts of air whipped into the chamber. Illya began to twist and sway as the winds gripped him.

The chain linking his wrists to the ceiling creaked and revolved. Illya was twisted one way until the chain could twist no more. Then the chain unwound. Illya spun back the opposite way. To this wild motion was added the back and forth thrust of huge air currents which alternately caught him from two directions.

Over the keening sound of the mechanized wind came Mei's whimper of pain. Then Dargon's voice again:

"In this chamber, Mr. Kuryakin, we first achieved our breakthrough. We created artificial weather conditions. Of course this

room is primitive. This antiquated installation is ideal for our present purpose, however." Dargon clapped his hands. "Major, our guests are not suitably impressed. Shall we generate a bigger storm?"

Major Otako smiled viciously. "Oh, Dargon, let's not be pikers. Typhoon velocity winds."

"Typhoon velocity it is!"

The incredible burst of wind which poured into the chamber made Illya swing wildly at the end of the chain. Each swing brought fresh shocks of pain to his shoulders, his arms, and soon his whole body. The winds veered direction without warning. This increased the sudden, savage pull. Mei began to cry again. Her tears were whipped away by the wind's force.

Illya's mind boggled at the infernal cacophony beating on his ears. Somehow, though, Dr. Dargon's amplified cackle penetrated it:

"For dessert, let us try a sampling of Sahara heat."

To the wind was suddenly added boiling temperature. Perspiration rivered down Illya's face. He wanted to shout aloud in pain. He would not give Dragon and Otako the satisfaction.

He shut his eyes.

The heat was rising well into the one hundred and twenties. Illya felt as though he were being slammed back and forth by a killer sirocco. His arms vibrated with agony. Even his toes had begun to ache. Sweat plastered him. He felt himself growing faint—

With an abrupt jerk his body stilled at the end of the chain. The wind died. The heat diminished. Dimly he heard Dargon say, "The weak little fool has passed out."

Painfully Illya turned his head. He was glad to see Mei's head slumped on her breast. Unconsciousness was the best narcotic for this sort of punishment.

Dr. Dargon conferred with Major Otako. He seemed to agree with the major's whispered suggestion. A door inside the control booth opened, flooding it momentarily with light.

The technicians and a chuckling Otako departed.

Dr. Dargon removed a ring of keys from the pocket of his smock. He jingled them derisively at Illya hanging there and panting.

"Only a temporary rest, only temporary. We'll lock up until the girl recovers. We have a great many thrilling experiences in store for you. These were simply samples. I can see you didn't care for them. Well, it's a pity, because we'll be back. Of course you won't know how soon. Ten minutes? Two hours?" Dr. Dargon jangled the keys. "You can agonize over how soon we'll begin again. That, too, is part of the sport. Pleasant worries, Mr. Kuryakin!"

The amplifier coughed and went out. Dargon left the control booth.

"Napoleon," Illya said to the

emptiness, "I hope you're grateful."

There was a faint clink of the chain as Illya accidentally moved and set himself swinging again. His arms felt hot and swollen. For the first time, he groaned in agony.

Time became unreal. Fear became the true reality. Illya tried not to dwell on the very thought which Dargon had planted. It was impossible.

The solitude and pain created dread. The dread induced a kind of reverse anticipation. Illya found himself hanging stone-still and staring at the heavily gasketed door, wondering, how soon will it open? How soon will the booth be occupied again? How soon? *How soon?*

THREE

HIS HEAD jerked up. He glanced around the egg-shaped room. The lights had been lowered. The chamber had a twilight dimness. It felt like the middle of the night.

Illya's arms were totally numb. He had feeling from his waist down, but precious little. He realized that he must have passed out for a time. Cautiously he turned his head. The small movement started him swinging. His arms throbbed and ached.

Mei's eyes were open. She stared at him dully, too tortured to speak.

"I think it's night," Illya croaked. "I think they're leaving us alone."

"Until the morning," the girl breathed through puffy lips.

"Napoleon will reach Hong Kong. He'll do something to help us."

"No one can help us. At least I shall die with—a brave friend."

The oval door clanged back. Dr. Dargon stepped over the sill. He carried a pistol in one hand and what appeared to be a black and white glossy photograph in the other.

Dargon approached and peered up at them. "Ah, you're awake. It is late, and other matters prevented us from returning our attentions to you this evening. However, I felt you must receive this vital news. It is my pleasure to inform you that your friend Solo has run out of rope. He is dead."

Illya's heart missed one pumping beat. "You're lying."

Dargon shrugged. "Well, for all practical purposes he is dead. Very likely General Weng has already attended to it. Solo's assault on the plane failed. Here, see for yourself. This picture was just transmitted from the electrophoto unit in the aircraft."

Horrified, Illya recognized the subject of the photo. Napoleon Solo lay unconscious on a carpet. A rifle had fallen at his side. Background details suggested the interior of an airplane. Illya squinted to see the photo better. It was un-

touched. Solo's face looked chalky, lifeless.

Dargon said: "I felt these tidings would help guarantee cheerful thoughts until we return to visit with you again. I am sure—*aargh!*"

The sudden slam of Illya's feet against the sides of Dargon's neck made the doctor squeal. In one burst of ebbing strength, Illya had swung forward and smacked his heels together. His feet held the scrawny flesh above Dargon's collar in a tight grip. Adrenalin pumping into Illya's body gave him the tiny extra measure of strength he needed.

Dargon struggled feebly and dropped his gun. It clattered away.

"The keys," Illya panted. "Throw the keys up toward my hands or I'll break your neck."

Dargon peered into Illya's face. What he saw there, coupled with his own innate cowardice, convinced him that temporary cooperation was the wisest course. He gulped in genuine terror.

Illya used every bit of his considerable strength to maintain the pressure on Dargon's neck. He said through tightly-locked teeth, "If you make a single move in the direction of that gun, I will cut off your circulation and kill you with the pressure of my foot. U.N.C.L.E trains its people in neurophysiology. My right heel is resting in a potentially fatal spot. You may be able to jerk away, but you will be dead by the time you reach your gun. Now throw the keys at my hands, and very carefully. You have only one chance. I hope your aim is accurate."

Dargon's eyes grew saucer-like. "It's a—a cheap, filthy bluff."

"Then you have nothing to lose by submitting your conviction to the scientific method. Shall we run a little test, Doctor?"

He did not know how much longer he could maintain his pressure. But Dargon gave in. He clawed the keys from his smock. He licked his lips and threw them high.

Illya released Dargon's neck. The doctor had aimed to miss, as Illya knew he would. Illya wrenched his body forward in a tremendous tumbler's kick-out. That way he managed to bring his hands into a position to catch the keys as Dargon dove for the gun on the floor.

Illya had to work by feel, twisting one key after another into the lock mechanism which he had previously located in the six-inch bar between the manacles. Dargon got hold of the gun. He whirled. Illya found the right key. The manacles snapped open. He dropped and hit the floor as Dargon's shot thundered.

Like a cat Illya raced for the scientist as Dargon tried to level the gun for another shot. His hand trembled like a wind-lashed bough.

"Help, help!" Dargon piped in ludicrously reedy tone. Then Illya chopped him brutally in the throat. Dargon collapsed.

"The shot!" Mei exclaimed. "The guards will come—"

"Possibly not," Illya breathed. "Unless I am wrong, a test chamber like this is amply insulated. Wait here."

He snatched the keys and ran out through the oval door. In moments, he had entered the control booth from an empty corridor. He located and activated the winch. Mei was soon on the floor, covered with several yards of chain. More was coming down on top of her every second as Illya sprinted back in and unlocked her. His eyes were grim.

"We must assume Napoleon is dead, Mei. Therefore this foul lump—" He prodded the just-awakening Dargon with the pistol. "—is going to be our tour escort. He is going to show us how to get out of here, and guide us to Hong Kong."

On hands and knees the stupefied, terrified Dargon stared up into the muzzle of Illya's gun.

Illya dragged Dargon to his feet. "Show us the scenic exit route. And quickly!"

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO wakened with a buzzing skull and a mouth which tasted like a mixture of camphor oil and woolen athletic socks.

Above him soared a pastel ceiling. He turned his head. A rich wine-colored sea of nylon carpeting stretched away to a pair of white doors with gold hardware. Dotted here and there like islands upon the carpet sea were assorted pieces of furniture in the style Solo characterized as Assembly Line Modern. White, and upholstered in plastic.

Cautiously Solo stood up. In a couple of minutes the Oriental gong players inside his temples suspended their music.

The floor tilted into place and held steady.

Solo was in a luxurious hotel room. Tall French doors stood open on a small marble terrace. Past the balustrade he glimpsed high peaks with bright buildings crowding their shoulders. He saw water—a harbor.

A ferryboat chugged toward the distant, misty mainland. Junks and sampans clogged the water in the nearer distance. From out of sight below the balcony, a city's sing-song cacaphony rose.

"Welcome to Hong Kong, Mr. Solo," boomed a familiar voice.

Spinning round, Solo gaped. Beside an open door which he had not noticed stood a Eurasian girl with shoulder-length black hair. Her eyes were pansy-colored. She did not have the typical, slender build of the Oriental woman. She

was a few inches taller than Solo himself.

The girl wore a white, shimmering blouse, voluptuously tight black riding trousers and highly polished black boots. Her figure was gorgeous. Her eyes and her pistol weren't.

"Is someone using you for a dummy?" Solo said. "I heard General Weng."

The general's polished head poked around the edge of the open doorway where the girl with the slanted eyes had taken up her stance. "My little charade," Weng said in his asthmatic wheeze. "I am here, in the flesh, so to speak." He appeared, hands pressed to paunch and a jaunty white woven tropical hat freshly jammed onto his skull. "Are you surprised to find yourself alive in my suite in Hong Kong?"

"That's a considerable understatement." Solo had been outfitted in slacks, a fresh white shirt, shoes, socks and other linen, all of his size. In his shirt's breast pocket he felt an oblong thing, like an old friend. He reached up to pull it out.

"Do not raise your hand," said the girl with a charming smile, "or I will shoot you."

"You don't have to enjoy your work so much. "I only wanted a cigarette."

"It will be permissible for him to smoke," Weng nodded. "Our agents searched him thoroughly when the plane landed. He has no weapons. A brilliant idea my pilot had, eh, Solo? Doping us both in order to capture you? And captured you are. May I present Miss Rachel Fong of our Hong Kong apparatus? Miss Fong is only twenty-two, but she has held the regional THRUSH medal for superior marksmanship for the past three years. I trust that will be sufficient warning."

The girl's ripe smile widened. At first, her pansy-colored eyes had seemed to hold a smoky, romantic warmth. Now Solo decided with a shiver that he had confused sensuality for good clean sadism.

Carefully he reached into his shirt pocket. He drew out the cigarette case and flicked the top open. After he had lit up, he replaced the case.

He did not yet know how he would capitalize on the error of the THRUSH searchers who had overlooked his pocket communicator. Probably there had been no time for an electronic scan of his person. The communicator did hold several cigarettes.

Unfortunately, the unwavering presence of Miss Rachel Fong's mammoth snout-nosed pistol gave him no immediate opportunity to use the communicator. So he left it in his shirt as his ace. He needed one if he was to play this game out, not only for Mr. Waverly, but for the sake of Illya, and Ah Lan and Mei. He wondered how they had died.

General Weng gestured to the open French doors. "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"I suppose you'll do your best to change it," Solo said.

Weng's paunch heaved once or twice by way of appreciation. "You really are most entertaining, Mr. Solo. As a matter of fact I am on my way to do just that. The storm generating apparatus is stowed in my limousine." Weng examined his platinum watch. "The car is at the curb now, I believe. This hotel should be relatively safe. A pity we can't say the same for the Hong Kong International. Good day, Mr. Solo. Enjoy your balcony seat overlooking the display of Mother Nature at her most capricious. About an hour and we should be positioned for a bit of typhoon. Watch the sky."

General Weng waddled toward the door. Solo said, "Why can't you work from here?"

"We follow the recommendations of Dr. Dargon and our other scientists as to optimum location."

"Where is your optimum location, General?"

"Ah, Mr. Solo, even though I am positive that you can do THRUSH no harm while Miss Fong attends you, it would be unwise, and a breach of policy, for me to reveal the information. Even Miss Fong does not know. As soon as my task is finished I shall return here and we shall fly back to Tibet together. There you will be most permanently de-commissioned—"

Weng chuckled at his little euphemism "—as an agent of U.N.C.L.E. I have already decided to have motion pictures shot of the entire proceedings They will be forwarded anonymously to your superiors, for whatever amusement they may provide."

With a jaunty wave General Weng marched out. Miss Fong latched the door behind him. Solo waited.

The Eurasian girl leaned against the gold-flecked panel and scraped her shoulder blades on the wood in a slow, feline way. Solo cocked a mental eyebrow. Maybe Miss Rachel Fong was not so loyal as General Weng imagined.

Solo unloosed his most potent smile. "Miss Fong, you're the sexiest THRUSH agent I've ever seen. And I've seen scads of them."

The smile on the lips of Miss Rachel Fong widened appreciably, as if in invitation.

With this encouragement Solo advanced a couple of steps. Miss Fong did not fire a bullet into his stomach. That was even more encouraging.

Solo was now barely a step away from the girl's warm, moist mouth. Her pansy-colored eyes were lidded.

Miss Fong closed her eyes and pouted her lips. Solo murmured, "You are young, Miss Fong. And

pretty. Indeed you are pretty pretty—" Solo timed his last word to come out just at the moment he was pressing his lips to Miss Fong's and preparing to rabbit punch her.

Miss Fong hit him in the stomach with her knee.

Two more karate chops and one judo toss later, Solo lay on his back. Miss Fong drew her leg back gracefully and kicked him in the side of the head.

"I didn't realize that in addition to being good with a gun you were the leading actress in the THRUSH theatre guild," Solo groaned.

"That was your error," Miss Fong replied with a smile that was no longer dewy, but venomously delighted. "You U.N.C.L.E. agents are such naive fools. You think a mere flex of a bicep will strip us of our dedication to the most glorious organization in the history of the world." As if to emphasize the incorrectness of Solo's reasoning, Miss Fong hauled off and let him have another kick in the temple.

This final act of defiance was her undoing. Solo grabbed her flying boot and gave it a terrific wrench.

With an enraged scream, Miss Fong spilled backwards. Solo jumped on top of her. He tried to wrestle the gun from her hand. Her long, unpainted nails tore bloody channels down his cheek.

The girl heaved from side to side to roll him off. She was incredibly

strong. Solo clamped both hands on her gun wrist. Miss Fong twisted hard. The muzzle swung around, aimed at Solo's rib cage.

Instantly Solo released her and jerked himself away. The abrupt loss of tension threw Miss Fong off balance. Her gun cracked. Two panes of the folded back French doors shattered.

Solo doubled his fist. "No lady kicks a gentleman where you kicked me, Miss Fong—" He connected.

Miss Fong's head snapped back and hit the rug. The pistol spurted one more time as her knuckles banged the carpet.

She lay still.

Solo staggered to his feet. It took him only two minutes to arrange the effect he wanted. In one of the bedroom closets he discovered a collection of feminine clothing. The property of one of General Weng's lady friends, perhaps?

Solo chose a black negligee. Then he dumped Miss Fong into the king-size bed, wrapped her in the negligee and drenched the

room with a perfume atomizer from the dressing table.

The room reeked with *Essence d'Amour*. Solo glanced at the slumbering THRUSH valkyrie.

"I hope you can explain your loyal, efficient appearance to General Weng after the big blow, sweetie," he said. He kissed his fingertips at her and ran for the door.

FIVE

ON THE BUSTLING Hong Kong Street outside the plush hotel, Solo merged into the polyglot crowd. He walked briskly for five minutes, trying to organize his thoughts.

As he walked he kept glancing up past the bizarre shop signs with the Chinese characters and English legends side by side. A small cloud had rolled across the sun. Around him, clipped British accents mingled with singsong dialects in typical midday unconcern.

At an intersection Solo found a ricksha and hopped in. "Hotel Hong Hong International, chop-chop."

The ricksha driver set off down the cobbled way at a brisk run. He shrieked and cursed at pedestrians and small European cars which got in his way.

Solo knew he had major trouble on his hands the moment the ricksha driver pulled into the wide, sweeping semicircular drive of the Hotel Hong Kong International.

The wind had a banshee sound. The sky was virtually black. Electric lights had come on in buildings along the streets. Further down from the hotel, a power line had fallen. A frightened man, hurrying for shelter, ran into it and died in a waterfall of bluish sparks.

Solo ran up to the knot of Crown Colony police at the hotel entrance. He looked like a ghost, but they looked little better.

"—unnatural, that's what it is," one policeman was saying, staring at the sky.

"I have to get in the hotel," Solo said, starting past them.

A revolver was thrust hard into his midsection. The policeman with the bushy red mustache blocked his way.

"No you don't, sir. We have our orders. No persons can be admitted to the International without the proper identiy card from he management."

"I lost my identity card!" Solo had to shout to make himself heard above the gale. "My name is Napoleon Solo. I'm an agent of the U.N.C.L.E."

"Be that as it may, no identity card, no admittance. If anyone tries to break into this hotel without identification, we're authorized to shoot. Now sling your hook before we all get killed in this bloody storm."

Solo grabbed the man's sleeve. "You don't understand! The International is going to be destroyed.

You have to get the delegates out of there—"

"What delegates?" the policeman bawled.

"The delegates to the Seminar on Asian Cultural Resources."

The policeman's shout was emphatic: "Never heard of it. Now I warn you, move along—"

"But this storm is being manufactured!" Solo yelled over the din of rain and wind.

"Balmy!" the officer exclaimed. "I knew it the minute I spied you mixing it up with Charlie Luke. This bloke's a drunk or a hophead or worse, lads. Let's give him the heave-ho!"

"Wait, wait, dammit, you don't understand! My name is Napoleon—"

With a thud Solo landed on the cobbles at the foot of the drive.

He came up like an angry animal, his temper raw because the fools wouldn't pay attention. He took an impulsive step toward the half dozen policemen who had assisted in his departure. All at once the strain showed on their faces. They drew guns.

The ring of police pistols hemmed Solo in. A hissing lightning bolt sent weird blue fires dancing in reflection along the gun muzzles.

The mustached officer said, "Be off, now, or we'll shoot you where you stand."

For one crazy moment, Solo wanted to wade in. Then reason checked him. He whirled and raced across the street.

A few stragglers fled past him. Portions of a roof went sailing over his head. On the fifth floor of the International several windows blew out with great explosions of glass.

The very street under his feet seemed to rock as the force of the storm increased.

Soaked and shivering, Solo darted into the comparative cover of the devastated fried eel restaurant. He pulled out the pocket communicator and pressed the concealed spring stud which opened the secret control panel. With the communicator close to his face, Solo said:

"Open Channel D."

It was the last resort. In a moment, a clear, controlled voice from the box said, "This is Alexander Waverly speaking."

"Solo, sir. I'm in Hong Kong, and—"

"Solo! Great heavens, man! I thought you had been killed."

"No sir. It's Illya. He was captured while I escaped from Tibet. THRUSH has probably put him to death by now, along with our contacts there who—"

"Mr. Solo," Waverly interrupted, "what is that dreadful racket? I can barely hear you."

"Just a bit of rain we're having," Solo's face was harsh. The street ran with rivers of rainwater now, rainwater which carried debris and

now and then a pitiful human corpse.

Solo explained what had happened. He concluded, "The THRUSH storm generator is working perfectly. But I don't know where Weng has set it up. I can't get past the police to warn the delegates at the conference. Is there an U.N.C.L.E. man inside the International? I could call him with the communicator if I knew the frequency—"

Solo's last hope faded as Mr. Waverly said, "We have no agents inside the hotel. We were relying upon you and Mr. Kuryakin. Forget the hotel, Mr. Solo. The repercussions of this can be far greater than simply the destruction of the conference. You must find the storm generator and smash it."

"But it could be anywhere in Hong Kong It could take hours. By then—"

"Find the generator, Mr. Solo!"

Rain lashed from the inky sky and dribbled down Napoleon Solo's face. He stared a moment at the small box cupped in his hand. Mr. Waverly was asking the impossible. Unfortunately only the impossible could save Hong Kong from annihilation.

More windows burst. On a high balcony a frantic guest slipped on a terrace, hit the railing, spilled over and fell, howling. Down the street the entire wall of a brick warehouse caved in under the wind's pounding.

The crackle of Mr. Waverly's voice pulled him to his senses:

"Mr. Solo? Do you hear me? Find the generator."

"Acknowledge," Solo said. He pressed the button which silenced the communicator.

He leaped forward as he heard a grinding sound overhead. He landed face first in the torrent of water filling the street. A few feet behind him the facade of the building had given way, and dumped several tons of wood and masonry onto the spot where he had been standing.

He'd acknowledged Mr. Waverly's command. But where in the malestrom did he start? He staggered up and said under his breath, "The incredible we do in five minutes. The impossible takes a little longer."

Slipping, stumbling, Solo began to run back in the general direction of the hotel where he had left Miss Fong unconscious. Weng had told him that she did not know the transmitter's location. Had he lied? Solo doubted it. THRUSH discipline regarding secrets was both inflexible and uniform. Lower echelons were kept in the dark.

Still, Miss Fong was his only hope.

All around him buildings collapsed, fallen power lines hissed, people shrieked in fear. And despite the rain, fires were breaking out. Solo ran until his lungs ached.

He had gone only a few blocks

when his pocket communicator began to beep frantically.

ACT IV
"IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS . . ."

So far Dr. Dargon had been unusually cooperative. This indicated to Illya that the scientist intended to betray them at the first opportunity.

Illya was tense. The slightest odd sound or innocent-appearing shadow brought cold sweat to his forehead.

Dr. Dargon had led them through a series of maze-like passages. They had climbed three stairways and ridden two elevators. In between sucks at his tooth, Dargon kept assuring Illya that he was showing them the only safe escape route. Consequently, the further they went without detection, the more Illya became convinced that Dargon was attempting to lull him into false security.

It had taken them nearly half an hour to wind their way upward to this brilliantly lit corridor with gray cinder block walls.

"Only a short distance more," Dargon whispered.

"And then we fall through a trap door into a pit of ravenous bears?" Illya asked.

Dr. Dargon's hands fluttered near his waist. "No, no, I assure you—"

"Please spare me your assurances," Illya cut in. "Where is the hangar?"

Dargon indicated blue steel doors in the distance. "Just through there."

They moved ahead. Mei walked close to Illya on his left side. Her pretty face showed the ravages of fatigue and pain.

"Mr. Kuryakin, do you think you can fly the airplane the doctor told you about?" she said.

Illya shrugged. "He described it as a Nova Class IV two-jet fighter-bomber. I have had some training with that type of aircraft. Enough to give it a try, anyway. While I'm at the controls you will have to watch our guide."

The girl paled. With some weariness, Illya said, "For heaven's sake why are you trembling?"

"I—I have never been in an airplane before."

He didn't bother to tell Mei that he had been boasting about his flying ability. He could pilot smaller planes under reasonably normal circumstances. He had not taken over the Air Pan-Asia jet because of the weather, and his lack of formal training on huge commercial aircraft. He quite possibly might crack them all up on one of the Himalayas, provided they got that far.

"We'll come out of this all right," he reassured the girl. "I'll use the plane's radio to call Hong Kong and warn those at the conference to evacuate the Hotel Internation-

al. There are many people depending on us, Mei. We have to come through."

Kurayakin, he thought to himself, you are a shameless liar.

Dr. Dargon had reached the blue steel doors. He turned around. Ceiling lights flared off the lenses of his spectacles.

"I can offer no guarantee that the aircraft will be in the hangar, Mr. Kuryakin."

"For your longevity's sake," Illya said, "I hope it is. Please go ahead."

With a bob of his head Dr. Dargon extended his hands in front of him, as if to use his palms to push the door open. His gesture brought instant pandemonium.

Sirens and bells went off. Illya was getting rather used to the racket by now. Sections of cinder block wall pivoted back and the impersonal lenses of television cameras began scanning the corridor. Illya gave Dargon a smack in the back of the head with the captured pistol.

"You filthy doublecrosser! I didn't see you touch anything—"

Dr. Dargon giggled. "The detectors concealed in the frame of these steel doors are extremely sensitive. They detect even heat emitted by human bodies. Thus the slightest change in corridor temperature activates the alarms. No physical contact is necessary for—*down here! Save me!*" Dargon squealed, glancing past Illya.

THRUSH soldiers had appeared at the corridor's far end. Illya dragged Dargon around in front of him to serve as a shield. He squeezed off a shot at the officer in the lead of the pack. It was Major Otako.

Illya's bullet missed. The major flattened against the wall. His S-scar shone with pallid ugliness. Illya said over his shoulder, "Try the door, Mei."

After a moment he heard her say, "It is locked." Panic edged into her voice.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot! It's I, Dargon!" the scientist cried, struggling in Illya's grip.

Major Otako seemed unconcerned that the THRUSH intellectual was currently serving as Illya's shield. Otako wigwagged with his swagger stick. "What are you waiting for, men? Fill the old gas-bag with bullets if necessary. His work is done. I want the U.N.C.L.E. agents."

Savagely Illya tightened the crook of his left arm around Dargon's neck. "Well, Doctor," he snarled, "they have as few scruples as you. So we'll all die together, unless you know how to open this door."

Dargon thought it over only for a second. "The—the middle hinge. It contains a removable section. Inside you will find a small button."

Mei bent over the hinge. Illya squeezed off two more shots. They

tore holes in the cinderblocks but missed Otako. The THRUSH soldiers had formed two ranks. The ones in the first were kneeling, aiming their rifles. Illya felt a tug on his robe. He turned and leaped through the door, pulling Dr. Dargon with him as a volley of shots ripped into the wall around the opened door.

Illya and Dargon sprawled on oil-stained concrete. Illya jumped up. He dragged Dargon by the collar. Their shadows sprang out before them in the huge hangar. Behind, Otako screamed frenzied orders.

The fuselage door of the Nova IV fighter-bomber stood open. A mechanic poked his head out. He yelled as the party of three escapees came pelting toward him.

The mechanic tore a pistol from his coverall pocket. Illya shot. The mechanic dropped out of the fuselage door and thudded on the cement.

"Inside, and don't stand on ceremony," Illya said. He shoved the flailing Dargon up to the fuselage door and gave him a kick aft to help him along. Then he spun around and fired a shot which felled a THRUST soldier.

Major Otako was urging his men forward. He had found a submachine-gun which he was levelling at Illya as the latter boosted Mei into the plane and scrambled after her.

A second after Illya closed the hatch, bullets began to ping their way along the skin of the aircraft. No holes appeared. Evidently THRUSH had built well, using some armored alloy.

Illya tossed the gun to Mei and indicated Dargon. "As the major put it so eloquently—if he moves, fill the old gas-bag with bullets." He raced for the cockpit.

Bullets spanged and thudded against the cockpit windows as Illya dropped into the bucket, ran his eye down the controls. He hit two of the labelled switches. The wide corrugated steel door of the hangar immediately began to grind aside on a motorized track.

The cockpit windows now displayed several star-marks from the impact of bullets. By peering through these, Illya could make out the THRUSH soldiers ringing the plane, pumping shots at it relentlessly. Major Otako looked irate. He actually trembled. Illya threw switches with desperate haste.

Outside, Otako tossed aside the gun in disgust. Signaling several others to follow him, he disappeared.

The Nova IV fighter-bomber was a huge, sleek craft with an immense V-swept wing. The plane's two powerful jet engines were located at the tail. Illya found the controls for switching these on. He did not do so immediately. Instead he followed the pre-flight check list, a small card hanging above the instrument panel.

Never before, Illya supposed, had the check been done so fast. Slap, slap, snap, snap. He threw switches practically without looking at them. He hoped he was hitting all the right ones. At last he ignited the jet engines and felt the Nova IV strain forward.

He took the controls, swallowing hard. The Nova IV began to roll toward the black field. At last the hangar doors passed out of sight behind.

Illya increased taxiing speed. Mei had come up behind him. Dr. Dargon slumped limply against the cockpit wall. His expression indicated that he had abandoned nearly all hope. Illya sent the plane racing toward the sharp turn onto the main runway, where parallel lines of blue beacon lights along the runway's edge led off into the darkness and the point of no return.

Abruptly the cockpit was splashed with light. Powerful searchlights from the headquarters buildings crisscrossed the field. Mei shrieked low and pointed behind her.

Out the starboard window Illya saw an open military vehicle rolling alongside the plane, careening and veering to keep pace. The THRUSH driver looked petrified. Legs braced wide apart, Major Otako stood in the vehicle's rear. His fingers were locked on the handgrips of a peculiar weapon on a swivel mount. The weapon resembled a conventional machine gun except for the bright metal coils twisted around the barrel.

Otako's mouth worked. His face was contorted with hatred. Though Illya could not hear the sound above the roar of the jets, he knew Otako was shrieking at the driver, ordering him to keep up with the taxiing jet. Illya measured the distance to the turn onto the runway. Still a good way to go—

From the tip of the coil weapon in the THRUSH vehicle leaped a blood-colored thread of light. It struck the fuselage of the Nova IV and the cockpit glowed scarlet. "Laser cannon," Illya cried to Mei. "Get down!"

The beam of ruby light pierced the fuselage wall inches behind Illya's head. The way the jet was jouncing, he might be jarred back into that destructive beam at any moment.

He knew the Nova IV would never reach the main runway with Otako operating the laser device from the vehicle racing alongside. He said a brief, wordless prayer and hit the controls.

The fighter-bomber's giant tires smoked and squealed as the brakes locked. At the same time Illya swung the plane sharply around to the left, almost heeling it over on its nose. But the effect was achieved.

The heated gasses flowing out of the rear jets with tornadic force were aimed directly across the taxi strip. The THRUSH vehicle could

not stop in time. Major Otako shrieked as the vehicle plowed into the streams of heat and fire from the afterburners. There was a sudden, dull explosion that rocked the plane.

Even before the first sound-waves hit his ear, Illya was attacking the controls again. Like a drunken bird the Nova IV zigzagged back on course.

Illya wheeled it hard left. The parallel blue lights stretched ahead. He poured on the power and the fighter-bomber picked up speed.

Glancing back, Illya saw a fireball consuming the remains of the THRUSH vehicle and, he trusted, of Major Otako.

Suddenly a sheet of flame gouted skyward from the middle of the runway just ahead. Illya grappled with the controls. He ran the Nova IV off the concrete, around the flame and back again, still maintaining speed. One or two more spectacular booby traps of that type went off before the blue lights blurred into streaks at either side of the cockpit, and the Nova IV lifted into flight.

Illya gulped for air. "Mei? Are you still with me? I have to watch the controls carefully. Our speed is very fast, and the radar shows the peaks are very high all around here."

Mei's voice came faint, "I am here, Mr. Kuryakin. You—you are a brave man."

In the process of leaning the fighter-bomber into a steep bank to the left, Illya positively glowed.

"Thank you for the compliment, my dear. Now if I can only get the landing gear up and locked away, we'll be off for Hong Kong. Where the devil are the switches? This cockpit is dark as—oh, here we go."

He pressed several studs in succession. The Nova IV continued to climb for a few seconds. It was still banking to the left, giving Illya an excellent view of the ground. He made out the runway lights and the spill from several open doors in the headquarters buildings. Suddenly the jet rocked. Up from the ground boiled balls of green-shot flame.

Illya bent over to peer. "This is very embarrassing."

"What's wrong?" Mei asked.

"Those weren't the landing gear controls. I had no idea this plane would be fully armed with—oh, well. It's one less nuisance for U.N.C.L.E. to worry about. Now we shall—"

Mei shrieked. A white wall loomed dead ahead.

"The mountains!" Illya jerked the controls.

The Nova IV went arrowing almost straight up, clearing the snowy white face of the crag by a slim margin.

"No more conversation," Illya said. "Not until we're safely out of this wilderness."

And with the help of several ad-

ditional dim lamps which Mei found and switched on, he managed to zigzag a course between the frozen peaks gleaming white and savage under the Himalayan stars.

In about fifteen minutes he had plotted a flight plan to Hong Kong. He hoped the altitude would be sufficient to avoid any Red Chinese interceptors. The jets murmured steadily. Great banks of clouds rolled along in the chill moonlight beneath them.

"We'll never reach Hong Kong in time," he said. "I must radio the authorities."

In the glow from the dash instruments, Illya's face looked wan and weary. "It's no use," he said. "I can't raise anyone."

A noise disturbed him. It was the crazed sound of Dr. Dargon sucking on his tooth.

"General Weng has succeeded! The storm generator is operating in Hong Kong. That is why you cannot contact any regular radio installation. You have failed Mr. Kuryakin; you have failed utterly. Isn't that splendid?"

Illya twisted around and almost hit Dargon on the jaw. The man was so damnably triumphant!

Dargon cringed back against the starboard instrument console to avoid the blow. Illya's face turned red. With a feeling of humiliation he pulled back his fist.

Dargon blinked. His spectacle lenses reflected the cockpit lights so that his eyes seemed to be holes through which tiny, different-colored fireflies could be seen. He tittered.

Illya cursed silently. To strike Dargon would be to admit that the evil organization had succeeded. Dargon realized this. Hence his amusement. Illya silently pummelled his mind for an answer.

In a moment he had one. Carefully he composed his face for the bluff.

"Well, Dargon, I suppose you are correct."

"Yes, it will be impossible for you to establish communication with Hong Kong."

Carefully Illya slid his hand down to the thick folds of his lama robe. His fingers probed until he found what he wanted. In the dark he moved his hand back from his knee.

"So we could not alert the proper authorities as to General Weng's whereabouts even if we wished," he said, trying to sound as dolorous as possible. "Where does he have the unit set up, by the way?"

"On a junk in the harbor. It is a large vessel with a black storm cloud painted on its sail. Quite appropriate."

"In a grisly way," Illya said. "The harbor, eh? Did you select the site?"

"Experimental meterological studies led us to the conclusion that the harbor basin in the vicinity of Smiling Fish Quay would facili-

tate the widest sweep for the generator, and afford maximum destruction of the area surrounding the Hotel International."

"I like a man who knows his subject," Illya grinned. "Thank you very much, Doctor." He pulled the pocket communicator from his robe, depressing the appropriate stud.

Dargon's eyes seemed to swell behind his lenses. "There is nothing you can do with the information, Kuryakin. Radio contact with Hong Kong is impossible. You said as much. I heard for myself—"

Uncertainty put a catch in Dargon's tone. He licked his lips.

"You're quite correct, Doctor," Illya said. "I cannot establish contact with the Hong Kong authorities by using the radio transmitter in this aircraft. And by the time we land in the Crown Colony, the damage will be done. U.N.C.L.E., however, has thoughtfully provided these little communicators, which your Tibetan cohorts did not discover when they searched me."

Illya showed Dargon the small box-like affair. "It's power is startling, Doctor. And its anti-interference properties are excellent. Let's see what we can do with your tidbits via our headquarters. Watch him carefully, Mei." Then, into the communicator: "Open Channel D, please. Extreme urgent priority."

Following several wheeps and crackles, a familiar voice said, "Waverly here."

"This is Kuryakin, sir."

For once, Waverly did not sound phlegmatic. "Mr. Kuryakin! This is incredible."

"At forty thousand feet above Red China in a THRUSH aircraft, I am inclined to agree."

"I thought you were dead, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya's words raced ahead of his thoughts: "It's Napoleon, sir. He's the one who didn't make it. General Weng of THRUSH captured him and I'm afraid he—*I'm* dead?"

"Mr. Kuryakin, evidently there has been a breakdown of communications between you and your cohort." Waverly cleared his throat, "Only moments ago I spoke with Mr. Solo in Hong Kong. He informed me THRUSH had liquidated you. Mr. Solo is attempting to find and destroy the THRUSH weather generator, which is already causing a storm of catastrophic proportions. A difficult task, since we don't know where it is."

Illya allowed himself a grin. "Sir, I know the whereabouts of the generator. I can't raise Hong Kong on the plane's radio but I should be able to contact Napoleon on the communicator. I thought that he had been—"

"Brevity is the soul of survival for Hong Kong, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly interrupted. "We shall open and clear all channels at once. I suggest that you get busy relaying your information to Mr. Solo."

"At once," Illya said, thumbing off the D band. Simultaneously, Dr. Dargon began to burble and bleat:

"Gulled! Gulled and deceived! You'll pay for tricking me—!"

Before Illya could whip round to fend him off, Dargon fastened his hands on Illya's throat and at the same time thrust forward with all his strength.

Illya tore at the fingers biting the flesh of his neck. Dargon slammed Illya's head against the instrument panel. Various switches and controls were knocked out of adjustment. Warning lights blazed and blinked. The fighter-bomber began to veer and tilt downward toward the cloud bank.

Illya struggled. Dargon was panting like an enraged bull. He pounded Illya's head against the console with a thud, and another, and another.

The edges of Illya's mind grew stained with darkness. The fighter-bomber was into a dive, its altitude dropping alarmingly. Once more Illya tried to rip the murdering fingers from his neck but couldn't get a grip on them. His mind was getting fuzzier by the second . . .

TWO

ANOTHER power line came whipping down like an electrified snake, directly in Napoleon Solo's path.

Blue fire danced and hissed over huge puddles of water. Solo jerked back from the puddle into which he had almost skidded.

Two ambulances passed at the next intersection, sirens going at full. One raced on out of sight. A mammoth gust of wind picked up the other and drove it into the wall of a building where it crashed and burst into flames.

Solo staggered into the cover of a shop front, which was already beginning to totter. He pulled the frantically beeping pocket communicator from his sodden shirt.

"Mr. Waverly?" he shouted into the box, "I haven't had time to find it yet—"

"If you would kindly stop bellowing, Napoleon," said a tinny voice, "I know where you can locate the generator."

"Illya! Where are you?"

"Sitting with a headache in a THRUSH airplane. Never mind that. I thought you were dead."

"I thought *you* were dead."

"The reports of our deaths have been greatly exaggerated. Dr. Dargon told me the location of the generator because he thought it was impossible for me to communicate with Hong Kong. I called Waverly on the communicator. He said that you had escaped Weng's tender mercies. I was in the process of calling you when Dargon tried to throttle me. I apologize for the delay, but it took Mei a minute or so to work up enough nerve to put a bullet into Dargon's stomach. He has designed his last unpleasant device for THRUSH."

More citizens went streaming by in the torrential rain. Their screams of fear trailed behind them. Solo said, "The city can't last much longer in this storm. Where's the generator?"

In thirty seconds Solo had left the shop front a block behind. It promptly collapsed.

A bolt of lightning lit the rain-swept foot of Smiling Fish Quay. The air smelled of ozone and decayed fish. Solo went sliding and skidding along the drenched cobbles to the quay's edge.

The only human being in sight was a fisherman kneeling in a cul-de-sac a few yards away. He was praying to be spared from the impromptu typhoon. Solo bent over. His back kept the rain off Miss Fong's pistol, which he pulled from his belt and checked.

The lightning fizzled into darkness. Thunder pealed so loudly it hurt his ears. Visually Solo tried to sort out the hundreds of wildly pitching junks and sampans moored in this part of the harbor. No lights showed anywhere, except on the distant mainland where they gleamed dimly through the driving rain.

Solo jumped aboard the nearest sampan, which was damaged, but still afloat.

It lurched terrifically under him. A monster wave washed over the deck and nearly pitched him into the water. The rain was coming at him almost horizontally because of the wind's force.

Lightning flared. Solo spotted a whopping sail on a half-broken mast. The sail displayed a large, crudely painted storm cloud. The craft was the third vessel beyond the one on which he was fighting for balance.

With big leaps Solo crossed the nautical stepping stones. He had to grab ropes or a mast as he landed on each boat, because the decks were tilting back and forth through an arc of almost ninety degrees.

The distance between the sampan and the junk with the torn storm-cloud sail was a good seven to eight feet. Besides, the sampan was tilting violently. So was the junk. Solo waited until he thought his timing was right. Then, gun in his right hand, he jumped.

He missed. A wave rolled the junk back out of the way.

Solo hit the water and went down, thrashing and flailing, into the customary waterside Hong Kong garbage.

The moored junk tossed back toward him and the hull smacked him in the head. Dazed, Solo grabbed the rail.

He tossed his right leg up and pulled himself aboard. Bits of refuse clung to him. A stream of water ran out of the barrel of his now useless pistol.

Two-thirds of the junk's deck was covered with a bamboo framework over which a tarpaulin had been draped. Inside the improvised deckhouse a spot of amber light glowed and wavered. Solo crept forward.

The deck pitched again. Solo fought for balance. He fell, making a loud, hollow thud during a lull in the thunder.

Part of the tarpaulin whipped aside. An ugly Oriental in a mud-spotted white suit thrust the muzzle of a big pistol into the dark. Beyond the man, Solo glimpsed General Weng's heaving bulk and the black generator box. Its sides glowed with red highlights from a small charcoal brazier.

"I do not see anyone—" the gunman began. Solo's shoulder hit him in the belly.

Solo and the gunman careened inside the tarp shelter. General Weng leaped up from a packing box. He wore the sinister switch-belt around his waist. A faint hum rose from the generator box. Solo saw all this in a wild blur as he went crashing to the slick deck.

The gunman leaped and landed, knocking the wind out of him. The gunman fastened one hand on Solo's throat and, gun in the other, took aim.

Solo brought his own gun hand lashing up behind the THRUSH agent's head. He cracked the man over his left ear. The agent made a loud, gulping sound. His grip loosened momentarily. Solo rammed his knee into the THRUSH agent's groin and lifted him off.

As Solo lurched to his feet, Gen-

eral Weng struggled to pull out a pistol. The gunman was up again too, aiming at Solo from behind. Solo spun and flung his useless gun.

It smacked the agent's nose. Solo had a split second to find another weapon.

He saw one, its point embedded in the top of a crude fisherman's bench. Solo's water-slicked hand closed around the haft of the scaling knife. He jerked it loose. The agent fired.

Solo tried to dodge. The bullet slammed into his left shoulder. But his right hand was already swinging in a killing aim. The serrated edge of the knife grazed the agent's throat like a caress. The man shrieked as blood flowed down over his lapels from the fatal slash in his neck.

Solo caught the gunman's pistol as it fell from slack fingers. General Weng was breathing in asthmatic panic. His cheeks gleamed with sweat and his eyes with murder. He had gotten his gun out. He chattered lurid obscenities as he fired.

His bullet took Solo hard in the left thigh. Blood soaked Solo's trousers instantly. His leg throbbed and weakened to the point where he could not stand. He felt the leg collapsing under him as he triggered the shot that caught Weng in the breastbone.

With an elephantine bay Weng fell over backwards, his shirt red. Solo lay on the slick deck, panting. His whole left pants leg was soggy with blood.

Weng propped himself on hands and knees. He aimed his pistol at Solo while his eyes wedged down into tiny pain-wracked slits. Solo flopped over on his belly. He braced his right forearm with his left hand to steady his aim. He centered the muzzle on the middle of Weng's forehead.

Thunder crashed in the sky. Another wave hit the junk's hull and sloshed under the edge of the tarpaulin. Most of the coals in the charcoal brazier were extinguished by the spray. A few still flickered but the interior of the tarpaulin shelter was dim. Random spots of light illuminated Weng's pained face. The adversaries held each other at gunpoint.

"Standoff, Mr. Solo," Weng wheezed. "Though perhaps I will get the better of it yet."

Muzzle to muzzle, the men lay on the deck as the storm roared.

Solo's lips peeled back from his teeth. "Turn off the switch, General. Turn it off unless you want one more bullet in your fat hide."

Weng gasped for air. A spasm of pain shuddered his blubber. "I can kill you while you kill me, Mr. Solo."

"Very true," Solo panted. The pain in his left leg was maddening. He felt dizzy. "But you aren't really sure whether that bullet in your chest has already put a period after everything, are you? Maybe you

want to take a chance. Maybe—you want to find out whether a police surgeon can patch you up. You kill me and I kill you and neither of us finds out. That's the way the hand looks to me, General." Solo bit his lower lip as his leg flamed with heat and hurt. "I said turn off the switch, General."

At last Weng coughed, "Yes. Yes. The will to live remains. You win."

With one hand he threw his gun across the shelter. It fell sloshing in water. With his other hand he flicked the switch on the belt. Solo let the muzzle of his own gun drop. He pushed himself up to his feet.

General Weng struggled and heaved, managing to sit up with his back resting against one of the tarpaulin supports. He lifted the blood-soaked lapel of his suit, felt gingerly beneath it. His paunch heaved slowly. Weng's face became crafty.

"I still maintain, Mr. Solo, that U.N.C.L.E. personnel are naive. Step around here on my side of the generator box, please. Fine. I trust that you can see the stencilling on the box? Can you also recognize the language?"

Beneath his feet, Solo could feel the deck heaving less violently. The thunder was less ear-splitting than before. He bent to examine the white stencilling. He stood up again, one hand braced on the generator so that he wouldn't fall.

"The stencil identifies the generator as the property of one of the governments meeting at the Hotel International. That's exactly according to your plan. But when U.N.C.L.E. turns the generator over to the proper authorities, your little flim-flam will be exposed. I'm afraid all that blood you've lost has weakened your logic, General."

"Not at all, not—at all." Weng coughed. "You see, Mr. Solo, we return to the subject of naivete. You believe you have convinced me that I have a remote chance to survive the impact of your bullet. I am more realistic. I am dying. However—"

With incredible speed Weng's fat yellow hand jerked out from beneath his black-bloody lapel. He cracked a football-shaped plastic capsule with his thumbnail. Sparks and smoke boiled. Weng tossed the capsule onto the deck. Blinding white tongues of flame leaped from it.

"That thermal device, Mr. Solo, will destroy the junk, water-soaked as she is. It will destroy my corpse along with yours. But the metallurgical materials incorporated into this belt and the generating unit—the tremendous heat will not harm them. The components will be found, their stencils intact. THRUSH will achieve its goal of touching off an armed conflict, even though you and I are not present to witness it."

Weng cocked his sweat-shining

head. "Listen, Mr. Solo. The rain has diminished. It will soon stop altogether. But the storm has just begun."

Solo snatched up a bucket lying beside the fisherman's bench, filled it with some of the water sloshing over the deck, flung the water on the fire. The white, sparking mass was barely affected. The soaked tarpaulin caught. White fire-tendrils raced upward. Solo dove to fill another bucket.

A huge hole appeared in the top of the tarpaulin. The smoky-white flames ate their way to the mast and began to climb higher. As Solo flung the second bucket, everything blurred. His left leg was giving out.

The decking was afire. General Weng's trousers were afire. The fisherman's bench was afire. But the generator remained untouched, unharmed. Solo fell again. This time he couldn't rise. His leg and shoulder wounds combined to make him helpless.

The white fire boiled around him. Its heat made his skin crawl.

"Farewell, Mr. Solo," General Weng said through the smoke. His eyelids were nearly closed, life nearly gone from his body. "I would suggest that we exchange greetings—in hell—except for the fact that I—shall not be joining you there. Hell is—reserved for failures. I have—succeeded—" With a vast shudder of his paunch, Weng died.

Solo lay blinded with pain on the deck. His right pants leg was sending up shoots of smoke. He had to save himself to tell the true story of the storm generator. With almost his last remnant of strength, he took the deadly belt and managed to put it on.

The junk was burning like matchwood. All around, the white brilliance leaped and crackled. Solo knew it was the windup. Weng was right. THRUSH would achieve its malevolent ends after all.

Dazed, he fortunately remembered the THRUSH pistol which he still held in his right hand. He gaped at it a moment. He groaned in pain as he flopped over on his stomach, aimed below the waterline and emptied the pistol into the hull.

A bit of orange peel floated in through the small hole his clustered shots had opened. Some of the fire fizzled out. Solo began pummeling at the edges of the hole. In a minute he had made an opening the size of his fist. More water poured in.

The junk began to list. Water rolled over the gunwale. The junk was sinking.

Solo paddled from beneath the edge of the burned tarpaulin, using one leg and one arm. He managed to reach the mooring line of a nearby sampan. He got the line around his waist so that he would not sink.

The junk disappeared from view, carrying the storm generator

and Weng's corpse to the bottom of the harbor.

Thus tethered, semi-helpless, yet somehow alive and conscious, it was as though little incidents, usually unnoticed, came into sharper, more vivid focus.

Solo saw a head emerge from over the taffrail of a crazily bobbing sampan, not twenty feet away. A saffron face, mouth open in surprise, looked solemnly into his, rolled its eyes in abject terror, and disappeared.

Half delirious, Solo laughed. "Can't blame the silly fellow," he said to the empty waves. "I really am not at my best. Lucky Bernice can't see me now."

For some reason, the idea seemed very funny to him. Bernice, who shuddered with distaste if a single lock of her auburn hair got out of place!

As if to bring him back to the unpleasant present, a large and fragrant bit of offal floated past his face.

High above him, in the city itself, he could see that a large cornice on the roof of the Continental had torn loose and was hanging and was swinging precariously over the street. One of the new apartment projects was afire. Through the smoke, as though framed in some nightmare, he saw a man, pajama coat flapping in the wind, poise on an upper window sill and jump, turning slowly end over end as he plummeted down.

The end of some poor devil. He wondered what the fellow was thinking as he saw his end rushing up to meet him. Probably nothing. For a man to do the Dutch act, forces stronger than conscious thought would have torn his brain away from any semblance of reality, so that fear retreated, and nothing remained but the dreadful certainty of the thing that he must do.

Someone was groaning softly. With a shrug of distaste, Solo realized that it was he who was making the noise.

He grinned bleakly up at the storm-tossed sky.

Waverly had always said that he, Solo, had a bit of madness in him.

This would make the old devil suck on his pipe and nod, all right.

Then, so gradually that he was not even aware of it, conscious thought went away, and only half dreams remained. Finally those too went away . . .

A harbor patrol boat discovered him bobbing unconscious among the orange peels an hour later.

THREE

STRING MUSIC filled the candle-lit room. The room was intimate, panelled in wine velvet. A rich curtain of the same material isolated it from the remainder of the restaurant. Across the stubs of the candles which had burned down during the meal, Illya Kuryakin took Mei's hand.

"It's been a delight to dine with you, my dear." Illya kissed her hand in his best continental manner. "Especially here in Hong Kong, with the city relatively intact, the generator recovered by U.N.C.L.E., and those two antagonistic countries back to the conference table. I must say you look radiant."

"Only because you have been kind enough to show me so many new and wonderful things these last few days," Mei said.

A remarkable change had come over the Tibetan girl. She had adopted a Western wardrobe. Her lustrous dark hair was done up in the latest bouffant style. She looked quite sophisticated and gorgeous. Rather maliciously, Illya decided he was glad Napoleon was still confined to the hospital.

Mei sipped the last of her wine. She glanced at him warmly. "I never believed we would live through it all. You showed such amazing courage."

"Well," Illya said, "I hate to sound stuffy about it, but it is nice of you to admit that someone else besides my dear friend Na—"

The curtains whooshed back. Dapperly dressed, Napoleon Solo grinned down at them.

"Someone mention my name?"

He walked with a slight limp, but his arm was out of the cast. He whipped the curtains together behind him and pulled a chair over.

"That doctor is a gentleman. He didn't want to release me yet. But when I told him I wouldn't miss this party for the world, he listened to reason. Well, here we are, the three of us again. Mei, you're ravishing." He patted her arm.

The girl's eyes glowed. Illya raised his napkin to hide a dyspeptic expression.

Solo rubbed his hands together. "What's on the menu? I'm starved. I would have been here sooner—" He reached for the wine bottle "—but it's raining outside. From natural causes, I'm happy to report."

Solo stopped in the act of pouring. "You know, I completely forgot. Mr. Waverly signaled the hospital to see if I knew where you were. He wants to talk to you right away. I think it'd be better if you stepped outside. Sometimes the communicator does make a lot of noise."

Jaw rigid, Illya rose. "Very well. But I'll be back."

"No need to hurry."

Solo turned to Mei and looked deep into her eyes. She seemed mesmerized.

"Mei," he said, "listen to a great idea. I have a few weeks' vacation due, the wounds and all, and I was wondering whether we could use that time to get you ready for a beauty contest coming up in the States. I think you'd be sensational as Miss Free Tibet—"

The curtain rings gave an angry clatter as Illya Kuryakin left. Napoleon Solo kept right on talking.

It was a 14-karat sure fire caper. Only a fool—or the sun—could ever kill it . . .

DEAREST THELMA:

I mailed this letter to your old playmate Gert and told her to bring it over to you as soon as she received it. If you think that's a funny way to do things, it is. But after you read this you'll understand why I couldn't write to you direct. That is, I hope you will. I'm sort of in a fog myself by this time.

Actually I hope writing this letter at all isn't a mistake. But I owe you some explanation for the mis-

HOW THE COOKIE CRUMBLED . . .

by ED LACY

erable Christmas you've had. Honey, as you'll soon see why, don't talk about the letter to anybody and the second you've finished reading it, burn it or flush it down the john. Thelma baby, if you still love me even a little, destroy this immediately!

Honey, you're going to be shocked, so it's rough trying to decide where to begin this. The immediate start was a muggy Saturday morning last summer. You may recall that you wanted to go to Jones Beach but I said I had to work.

It was hot; even sitting in Charlie's old car on the waterfront it was hot. I'll explain who Charlie is in a second. We were watching tugs pushing this sleek ocean liner against the dock. The buildings around us were a large warehouse, a plush skyscraper motel, a famous trucking company—everything so big they were making me nervous.

I asked Charlie, "Are you sure Tom wrote to meet him here?"

"Yeah, Lenny."

"What's Tom doing down in the islands, in this Nassau?"

"He hit a horse and took himself a cruise," Charlie told me, licking his lips nervously as he too glanced at the large buildings about us. "Man, I wonder what Tom has set up?"

"I don't know. But pulling a job practically in Times Square—I don't know!"

"Maybe he only wants us to help with his luggage?"

"Stop it, Charlie. I don't know if the heat is making me sweat, or I'm afraid of what I'm thinking."

"No sense in worrying, Lenny. Tom has always been the careful type."

Hold tight, Thelma baby. Here's something you never knew about me. I'm a part-time crook! It's the sad truth, honey. I was sent up to reform school, kid stuff—joy riding in a stolen car—some eleven years ago. I was fifteen then. Charlie was a few months older and Tom going on eighteen. We shared a cell and when we were released Tom had said:

"The hell with this punk stuff. It's dumb. The cops don't want to work any more than we do. So we stay away from headline capers, from violence, cases the cops have

to make a collar on. We'll pull small jobs, carefully cased, maybe only one or two a year. We'll all get jobs, look like working stiffs. We keep pulling these small, sure hits. One time we're bound to make a big score, but without any fuss or becoming known. Like that two-bit house-breaker who stumbled on a shoe box full of quiet money some doctor was holding out on the tax boys. If the jerk hadn't flashed the loot on a spending spree, he never would have been caught. That's us—we don't want a rep, merely to play it safe."

You see, Thelma, when we married it was too late to quit, I'd already pulled a few jobs. Plus—well, it was so easy.

Tom had been right over all these years. He's smart, has a knack for observing little things. Like he was hacking up in the Bronx one day and noticed a small factory with no bars or gate over the rear door on their loading platform. Tom, he quietly cased the factory for two weekends and on the third Sunday Charlie picked the lock and we'd gone in, to come out minutes later with $1172 in cash. They made tools and there were a lot of things we might have taken, but smart Tom said no: selling the tools would leave a trail.

You don't know Tom or Charlie because we purposely met only when we had a job set. Like I said, we only pulled a few capers a year, made small scores, but always hoping for the big one. We weren't armed, didn't even carry burglar tools, so there was little chance of us being picked up.

Thelma, you're probably in tears by now, but you see how it was—selling vacuum cleaners would never make me rich. The hundred or so bucks I made on a job was a big help.

But I was nervous this time: there wasn't anything in this mid-town area looking like a pushover.

About nine o'clock people started trooping off the dock and we saw Tom. He looked like all the other tourists, deeply tanned, wearing a sport jacket and a straw hat, carrying a suitcase and a heavy straw basket full of his five bottles of duty-free booze.

Once we were in Charlie's heap, Tom said, "The cruise was a ball. Here's a bottle of rum for each of you jokers. In another couple of weeks Washington is cracking down, only allowing the tourist to bring in one quart. Don't tell anybody where you got the rum from, about me going to Nassau."

Glancing at the bottle in my hand—remember, we had rum drinks that Sunday on the beach? —I felt stupid. Charlie said what was on my mind. "Thanks, Tom, but is this what you got us down here for, free booze?"

Tom grinned. He's nearly bald and has a thick nose from the days when he was an amateur pug. But wearing the coco-straw hat and

with his deep sun tan, he looked classy. He said softly, "Naw. I found us the big score we've been looking for all this time. We're going to hit that."

Honey, I nearly fainted, for Tom was pointing at this 38,000 ton ocean liner! Charlie merely grunted, "What can we do with a ship that big?"

"As for now all I want you to do is look at the fancy smokestack up there on the sun deck, at the rear of the ship. You both see the small cabin under it?"

We both nodded and Tom said, "We're not pulling the job until Christmas, but we start working on it this afternoon. Let's go to my place. I got an air conditioner."

Tom isn't married. He lives in what had been a crummy tenement until the Village art crowd took over the neighborhood. Tom said it was wonderful; he merely kept his door open and dizzy chicks walked in to flop on his bed. But that's Tom, not me.

Soon we were sitting around his kitchen table, drinking some rum. Tom had his shirt off. He sure was tanned. He had a deck plan of the ship spread out on the table and told us, "A ship is a little air-conditioned world of its own, a crazy world. This is an Italian ship with an Italian crew, but they fly the Panama flag and the tourists all talk English, of course. The deal is, the ship is also a careless world. I suppose they can never even imagine they might even be robbed. Now—"

"Then, we're not going to take the ship itself?" I said, feeling a little better.

"Lenny, stop being an idiot. What the hell would we do with a liner? Now listen to me carefully: the purser is the guy who handles all the money, sort of like the bookkeeper. On a ship this large there are three purser's offices, but the main one is right here, on what they call the Caribbean deck. This liner is too big to tie up at the Nassau dock, so it anchors outside the harbor and the tourists are ferried back and forth on a big tender.

"That's what gave me this idea. When you come off the tender you're on the Caribbean deck and actually pass the head purser's office, which I pointed out on the plan, to reach the elevators and stairs. Keep that in mind. I'm going to rattle off a lot of details, but you'll have time to remember them.

"As you'll see this afternoon, the purser's office is open at the front, has this long counter where they sell stamps, tours, change money, etc. Back of it there's this smaller office, with the ship's safe. Now, as you see here, on the plan, there's a side door to the office.

"Okay, now look up here, to the little cabin under the smokestack —the one I pointed out on the dock. Actually it's not so small; the front part holds all the air condi-

tioning machinery. But as you see on this plan, the back part of the cabin is marked *Kennels.*"

Following Tom's finger, Charlie and I nodded. He said, "I noticed a couple of things—in the purser's office they have one officer out front, waiting on the passengers and another guy, probably the head purser, in the back office. Once you close the door, nobody can see into the inner office, which is our big break. Also, while in port they keep the safe open; I guess they have to change fifty dollars and one hundred dollar bills for the passengers and maybe buy some fresh food and supplies in Nassau. Okay, now for the kennel deal: when they built the ship it was for the European run, but in the two years it took to build her, cruising the Caribbean became the big deal. The point is, *they don't use the kennel on these short cruises*. It was easy for me to pick the lock, have a look around—the kennels have a dozen small stalls and most important—water."

Tom poured himself another drink, then went on. "Let's look at the loot angle. There were one thousand one hundred fifty-nine passengers on my cruise, but Christmas is the height of the cruise season, so they'll be booked solid, with one thousand six hundred people. You buy a postal card from the purser for seven cents; they also sell Nassau airmail stamps for thirteen cents. Sending out a few cards to my relatives, before I got the idea of hitting the ship, cost me two bucks. These tourists, they're mailing cards like crazy, a big show-off deal. I figure they each spend at least five dollars, so the purser takes in eight thousand dollars on just cards and postage. He also sells sightseeing and night club tours of Nassau. All three tours come to eighteen dollars. Let's say at least one thousand passengers buy all the tours, so there's eighteen thousand dollars. The ship has about a dozen bars with drinks cheap; scotch is thirty-five cents and cocktails sixty cents.

"I was observing the cruise jokers; each one thinks he's in a movie or something, is constantly ordering a belt for himself and his friends. I figure each passenger spends a minimum of three dollars daily on booze, plus you have some real lushes aboard, too. That means at least five thousand dollars per day, all of it funneled into the purser's safe. As we'll hit them on the fifth day of the cruise, there should be about twenty-five thousand dollars in the safe. Cigarettes are one dollar and fifty cents per carton, so each passenger buys a couple of cartons to bring home, plus what they smoke on the cruise. That makes for another five grand. They also peddle souvenir booklets and other junk, plus the purser has to have about five thousand dollars in change on

board. All told, there's at least sixty-five thousand dollars in the chief purser's safe!"

Charlie whistled. "Nobody would ever think there'd be that much cash on a ship."

"There could be a lot more," Tom told us. "The ship docks each Saturday morning and by four that same afternoon it's heading out on another cruise. It's pos-

sible they don't take the money off to bank each Saturday and there can be a couple of hundred grand, maybe a half a million in that safe! But let's figure on sixty-five thousand dollars."

"How much of that is in travelers checks?" I asked.

"I was about to mention that, Lenny. I've no real idea of how much will be in checks, but we won't touch them. Too risky. My hunch is they won't amount to over five or ten grand—most of the passengers I saw used cash. I figure we'll each make at least fifteen thousand dollars and maybe double that!"

Charlie rubbed his hands nervously. "But Tom, the damn boat docks right in the Times Square area; the pier is crawling with the fuzz and—"

"I thought you understood. We're going to hit her down in Nassau."

"We're going out of the country?" I mumbled. Thelma, I actually was dumfounded. I mean, up to then I had no idea it would mean being away from you.

Tom grinned. "Why not pull a job outside the USA? I've picked Christmas, not only because the ship will be full, but also because we'll need overcoats for the job. We'll spend a grand for traveling money, maybe a little more, so we each kitty up five hundred dollars by December. I've already reserved a single cabin on the Christmas cruise for Lenny. I'd take the cabin, but a crew member might remember me. Charlie, you go for the bottle too much—so it has to be Lenny.

"You act like any other passenger, Lenny, living it up at the dances and all that. Tuesday morning, when the boat reaches Nassau, Lenny goes ashore with everybody else to buy bags in the Straw Market, see Paradise Beach. Charlie and I will fly down to Nassau the Saturday before, using phony names—no passports are needed. We check into a hotel like tourists and spend Sunday and Monday at the beach, getting a tan, wearing shorts and polo shirts. But Tuesday morning we'll sneak

our winter clothing out of the hotel, in straw baskets, give them to Lenny at Paradise Beach. He'll carry the baskets back to the ship, it will look like he's another souvenir-happy tourist chump. He puts the baskets in a closet in his cabin. Now, when Lenny boards the ship in New York, he'll have a roll of hospital tape, three plastic masks, like the JFK masks you buy in any novelty store and a couple of guns." Tom hesitated. "Yeah, I know, we've never used rods before—we'll only use them for bluffing here. Cabin stewards never look in suitcases, so no worry there, but you'll keep your bags locked anyway, while we're on the ship.

"The ship sails from Nassau at midnight, Wednesday. All the passengers go ashore during the day to shop, take the tours, swim at Paradise Beach. On Wednesday Lenny will leave the ship with his swim trunks and a towel in a straw basket—and under them, the masks and guns. We'll meet him in town. Charlie and I will each be carrying a straw basket with our trunks. Lenny slips us the masks and guns. The tender goes back and forth between the ship and shore every hour. I'll have bought a package of crackers and canned foods in Nassau, a big package looking like gifts, which Lenny will take back to his cabin on the noon tender, then meet us at the beach again. The—"

"This sounds pretty complicated," I cut in.

Tom shook his head. "It's simple. The details will all fall in place. Now, listen carefully: most passengers return on the five o'clock tender, in time for dinner. No landing cards are used and the tender holds about five hundred people. Charlie and I will go back on the tender trip with you, Lenny. We won't be stopped. We'll look like all the other male passengers: tanned, in shorts, carrying our swim things in a new straw basket. We'll be the last ones off the tender. This is when we hit 'em."

Charlie and I nodded and we were both scared.

Tom said, "Once they step aboard the ship the passengers rush to their cabins to dress. The second the hallway is empty, we put on our masks and rush in with our guns. I forgot, of course we'll also have gloves on. You and Charlie will barge into the inner office, cover the purser there. I'll force the officer at the desk into the inner office. We shut the door. Two of us tape and gag the officers while the other loads the straw baskets with money. We leave, taking off the masks in the hallway.

"All this should take two minutes, tops. The tender will be ready to make its return trip to Nassau, with a few passengers going ashore for supper with friends there. True, we'll need luck here,

but there's no reason for anybody to notice the missing officers for ten or fifteen minutes, perhaps not for a half hour."

"And if they do, we're trapped on the tender going back to shore, the ship phones the island police and we're picked up," Charlie said.

"Sure, they'll *think* we were on the return trip of the tender, but that's only a ten-minute ride and the odds are the officers won't be found for longer than that. I've checked and around then, when everybody is changing for supper, nobody goes to the purser's office for nearly an hour.

"The second we leave the purser's office, me and Charlie will be leisurely walking the stairs—we won't use the elevators—up to the sun deck. The chances are the stairs will be empty and even if we are seen, we look like passengers returning from the beach. We carry our straw bags of money into the kennels. The sun deck will be empty—like I said, everybody is washing up and dressing for supper. Lenny, you go to your cabin, as if nothing's happened, dress for supper." Tom stopped, looked at us.

I glanced at Charlie. "What kind of a deal is that? They'll search the ship for sure, once the officers are found, get us," I said.

Tom smiled. "You're wrong, Lenny. First, they are not going to search the cabins nor even announce the robbery. There's one thousand six hundred passengers paying an average of five hundred dollars each, meaning there's eight hundred thousand dollars—almost a million—in passage money. My feeling is the ship won't raise a stink, will keep the robbery quiet, but will have the police search Nassau, which will be full of other tourists at Christmas. Don't forget, the ship officers will think we escaped on the tender. Even if they should search all the cabins, Lenny is clean.

"We'll have the masks, guns and money in the kennels. The ship *has* to sail at midnight, so the Nassau cops only have six hours to shake down thousands of tourists, look for suspicious jokers, etcetra: an impossible job. And if the ship is searched, which I doubt, why would they look in the kennels?"

"A half a dozen hours doesn't give them much time, Tom; suppose they delay sailing back to New York?" I asked.

"They can't delay the sailing; they're operating on a tight schedule—there's another eight hundred thousand in passengers waiting in New York to take the New Year's cruise. The ship company isn't risking losing that for a mere sixty-five thousand. There's another reason why they'll keep the robbery quiet; they don't want to spoil the image of the cruise, even mention robbery. No, they'll hope the Nassau cops find the crooks while

the ship is making for New York."

Charlie took a nervous sip of his drink. "Ain't we in a worse mess, then, Tom? The ship docks here on Saturday morning, with us on it—how do we get by the U.S. officials, like Customs and Immigration?"

"By merely walking off the ship!" Tom said, grinning. "But not at the same time. Lenny, you'll go through Customs with the other passengers. Charlie and I will be in the kennels from Wednesday until Saturday. Remember I mentioned overcoats? When you sail, Lenny, you'll be wearing a winter coat and carrying a raincoat. There will be an opening in the raincoat lining, making it like a big bag.

"Now: Wednesday night Lenny brings our winter clothes and the food package up to the kennels. No risk, the sun deck is empty at night and the pool deck, just below, is a kind of lovers' lane deal then, so there's a lot of guys sneaking around and Lenny won't attract attention going on up to the sun deck. We'll give you the masks and guns, which you'll toss overboard, Lenny. Thursday and Friday nights Lenny brings our overcoats up to the kennels.

"Okay, it's Saturday morning and the ship has docked—Lenny's on his way home. In Nassau the cops are still looking for the masked crooks, Charlie and I will stay in the kennels until four. By then some four thousand people are aboard, seeing the one thousand six hundred new passengers off and most everybody is gay and crocked. Many passengers hand their winter coats to friends to carry off, meet them with the bulky coats when the ship docks the following Saturday. So Charlie and I simply walk off the ship with the crowd of friends, me carrying the raincoat full of loot over my arm. We'll meet at my apartment at five and split the money. All easy and simple."

"Won't the Nassau hotel report you and Charlie missing from your room?" I asked.

"Sure, after a few days. Two jokers named Smith and Brown are missing. Try and find 'em."

Charlie asked, "Are you sure the kennel is never cleaned or something?"

Tom nodded. "I'm sure. Why should it be cleaned? It isn't being used. Believe me, each crew member has enough to do without looking for extra work. Our only real risk is the initially important second it takes us to put the masks on and off, entering and leaving the purser's office."

"When you two walk on the ship, at Nassau, from the tender, you're positive you won't be stopped?" I asked.

"Why stop us? We're average size and sporting the tourist bit—tans, plaid shorts, straw hats and baskets. The crew sees one thousand two hundred to one thousand six hundred new faces each week.

They don't know who's who. Well, are you guys in?"

We nodded. I was scared. So was Charlie, I guess. He looked it.

Tom said, "We've time but a few things have to be done now. On Monday Lenny goes to the steamship office and pays the balance due on his ticket. This afternoon, about three, you two will go on board, as if seeing somebody off and walk around to get an idea of the layout of the ship. You can do that again in a few Saturdays from now and in the meantime memorize the plan of the ship. There's one other angle—the money. Wait a few months before spending it and even then, no flash stuff. Well, let's drink to becoming rich. It's simple and the simple jobs are the ones that work."

Thelma, I'll skip the time between then and Christmas. I knew you didn't believe that story I gave you about the company sending me to Miami to hustle vacuum cleaners for Christmas, but I never could lie to you, baby. All the time on the ship, and it was a ball with the Christmas party, the gala, and all the entertainment, all I could think of was how much I wanted you to be there with me.

Honestly, I didn't enjoy the cruise, not only was I lonely for you, but I never thought we'd pull the job off. Everything on the ship seemed so well organized, I had a feeling we were in over our heads. Saturday night, leaving New York City, the ocean was cold and rough. But by Sunday we were in the Gulf Stream and on Monday I was swimming in the ship's pool.

Tuesday morning I went ashore, to Paradise Beach. Honey, this is a real swinging beach and some day we'll go there together. They

have a steel band, a bar, coconut palms and the water is so clear it looks good enough to drink. It was on the clean sand of Paradise Beach, watching Tom and Charlie kidding some bikini-clad tourist babes from Chicago, that for the first time I felt confident we *could* make the hit.

I can't tell you why I felt so relaxed; perhaps it was because with our deep tans, straw hats and swim trunks, we really looked part of the tourist scene. Things went according to plan. That afternoon I carried their winter things back to my

cabin in straw baskets. The following morning I went ashore and returned with a large package of biscuits, crackers, canned foods, junk like that.

Then I returned to Paradise Beach, but with the masks, guns and tape in my straw basket. Paradise Beach shuts down at five and by four we three were dressed and riding one of the little boats across to the Nassau mainland. The tender, a sort of large tug with seats, was due to leave at five fifteen. Outside the harbor, the liner stood like a floating skyscraper.

We took seats in the stern of the tender, to make certain we were the last ones off. As the boat filled with tired and tanned tourists, I knew it would be impossible for anybody to spot Tom or Charlie as strangers.

At five thirty-five, we went up the gangplank and onto the liner deck. The tender was due to return to Nassau at six. When you turn the corner of the hallway, past the purser's counter where a white uniformed officer was checking some accounts—there's a gents' room, almost opposite the side door to the purser's office. Tom had overlooked this, but I'd spotted it. I went in and it was empty—all the passengers had rushed to their cabins. I slipped on my rubber mask—we'd picked Gary Grant masks—brown work gloves, to match my tan arms and took out my gun. Seconds later Tom and Charlie came in, did the same.

We opened the door, the hallway was empty: we stepped across into the purser's office. Charlie and I went into the inner office where a fat-faced officer looked up, in surprise, from his desk in front of the modern and open safe. Tom came in with the other officer, gun in his back. He shut the door and both officers were so scared they did exactly as I motioned for them to do—lie down on the floor. Tom and I quickly bound and gaged both men as Charlie filled our straw baskets with piles of bills—ten dollar bills, twenties, fifties and hundred dollar bills.

Exactly thirty-five seconds later Tom cautiously opened the office door—not a soul around. We crossed to the gents' room, shoved masks, guns and gloves into the baskets, covering them and the money with our swim things. Charlie and Tom left with the baskets—for the kennels. A second later I went down to my cabin, dressed quickly for dinner. Through the porthole I saw the tender leave for Nassau with a handful of passengers.

Taking an elevator to a lounge on an upper deck, I bought a drink and stood casually at the railing. Chimes rang for the first sitting, meaning it was seven. So far there wasn't a sign of anything unusual on ship. In the distance, I saw the tender at its Nassau dock.

Frankly, I don't know when the robbery was discovered, but as the quick tropical twilight came on and chimes for the second sitting—eight thirty P.M.—sounded, I saw the tender returning and ahead of it a small police launch. Several cops in white jackets and black pants, white helmets in contrast to their dark faces, came aboard, along with two civilians, obviously police brass.

I went down to the dining room and forced myself to eat. The waiters were rushing and fussing as usual. I had the feeling the crew didn't even know about the robbery. After supper I went back on deck. One of the jazz bands was playing dance music in a lounge; in the theatre they were showing a movie. Except for another police launch tied to the ship things seemed normal.

About a half hour later I noticed the fat-faced purser going ashore with the police brass. The tender made several trips and over the loudspeaker passengers were reminded again that the ship would depart for New York City at midnight, on schedule.

I know you can't understand the thrill I felt, Thelma, because I knew we were *in,* I'd be a rich cat soon! I had a drink, dropped in to see part of the movie, then wandered around the various public rooms, even playing a bingo card. At midnight I left the buffet to go out on deck, along with several hundred passengers and watch the lights of Nassau fade in the distance as our ship made for the open sea. I went to my cabin and waited until two, realizing how smart Tom was. The ship was keeping the robbery quiet, wasn't going to search any cabins or raise a stink.

At two I took the package of crackers and food and went up to the Sun Deck. Below, on the pool deck, I saw a number of couples necking in the shadows and Thelma, I really missed you. There was a hot jazz combo which played most of the night in a forward lounge and I knew how you love to dance, baby.

When I was certain I was alone, I went to the kennels and knocked three times. Tom opened the door and I went in. He whispered, "Lenny, one hundred and two thousand and six hundred dollars!"

"My God!" I said. "About thirty-four thousand each!"

"It went like a charm," Charlie said. "And who says a dog has a bad life? These kennels are air conditioned, even have classical music piped in and there's a shower and john, for the attendent, I guess."

Tom took the food package and gave me a straw basket with the masks, guns, gloves and tape. I told them how everything was going routine and leaving the kennels, I went down the stairs to an empty lower deck, dropped the

basket over, then went to my cabin and slept soundly.

Thursday was the usual jazz on the ship, the passengers swimming in the pools or sunning themselves on deck chairs. There was a short lecture about Customs and after supper the cruise staff put on a swell show. Most people turned in after the midnight snack.

At 2:20 A.M. I packed a straw basket with their winter suits, shirts, shoes, a razor and calmly rode an empty elevator to the Sun Deck. Charlie opened the door at my knock. Tom was sleeping on one of the dog blankets. "How's things on the outside?"

"Smooth. Not even a whisper about the robbery. Tomorrow, or rather tonight, there's the gala farewell dinner and we're due to dock Saturday morning."

"Tom says it will be cold by tomorrow night. You'll have no trouble bringing up our overcoats and *the* raincoat."

"Where's the dough?"

Charlie took me to a small stall and pulled back a blanket. Baby, I was surprised that a hundred grand only made a pile big enough to fill a small suitcase. But it certainly was a beautiful study in green!

Returning to my cabin, I couldn't sleep. I wasn't nervous, Thelma, merely thinking about you and what we'd do with my cut. I figured in a few months I'd buy you a fur coat, claim I'd hit the daily double at the track. And later we'd take a cruise. I want to show you Paradise Beach, have us spend some time in Nassau. With thirty-four thousand dollars we could take a trip around the world! Honey, I'm sold on cruising.

Friday was cold, the sea rough. In the afternoon we ran into a snowstorm. The ship rocked and rolled but I wasn't seasick. The gala wasn't much of a success, despite the paper hats and junk. Most passengers kept to their cabins.

At midnight I took the overcoats up to the kennels. Tom gave me the empty cracker boxes and tins to throw away, told me, "In the morning, Lenny, you go through Customs and then stay away from the ship. Just be at my place at five.

"I know."

When I left the kennels there was a gale blowing and the ship really tossed. Reaching the deck below, I found sailors putting up a rope rigging to help folks walk along the deck in the morning. I dumped the empty cracker boxes in a trash can and went to my cabin.

Again, I couldn't sleep—this time there was a nagging doubt in my mind which I couldn't shake, even though I was ashamed to be thinking of it.

Suppose Tom and Charlie, after they left the ship, took off with my cut? Sure, we'd been pals for

years, trusted each other in our other jobs, but they'd all been small time deals. I could picture myself waiting like a fool in front of Tom's place and he and Charlie on a jet to California or Mexico. I had no reason to think they'd cross me, yet the suspicion was there. I tried to think of what a ball you and I would have with my money, but my brains kept coming back to them crossing me. Thirty-four grand, my cut, was more than we'd made in all the other jobs added together!

We docked on Dec. 31st. As you know, it was a cold and snowy Saturday morning. Going through Immigration was simple. The officer merely asked if I was a citizen and checked my name off the passenger list.

Customs was something else. It was freezing on the barn-like dock and all the passengers stood around, shivering and cursing as Customs agents went through our bags. It was nearly noon before I got off the dock, but they were already loading food on the liner for the afternoon sailing.

I rushed home and found your note about you working and why hadn't I written you from Miami? I took the tags off my bags but didn't unpack them. I left a note that I'd see you later and started for Tom's apartment.

It was only 2:30 and I stood in the doorway, staring at the snow, feeling jittery. I went to a corner cafeteria for coffee. By then it was after three and time just dragged. Despite what Tom had told me, I took a cab to the dock. I stood across the street from the ship, watching passengers and friends in heavy coats go aboard, a festive air despite the freezing weather.

At a few minutes before four the friends started to leave the ship, a few remaining on the cold dock with silly streamers to throw, waiting for the liner to sail.

I was really jumpy by now, where the hell were they? I crossed the street and stood in a phone booth at the dock entrance. Then I saw Tom and Charlie walking along the dock—with four beefy guys, one of the guys carrying our raincoat full of money. From the way Tom held his hands, despite the long sleeves of his winter overcoat, I knew he was cuffed.

Well, Thelma, as you know, I rushed home and grabbed my bags. When you came in, how could I possibly explain things? Sure, I understood you're being sore, you had all the right in the world to be mad at me, suddenly I'm home and the next second I'm leaving with all the cash you had in your pocketbook. Baby, honest, I'm sorry I had to slap you, but there wasn't time for words. That's why I've written this long letter. Now that you've read it, remember, destroy it at once.

I've been holed up in a flea-bag hotel in—never mind where. I

doubt if the cops will call on you, but if they do tell them everything about us, except what I've told you in this letter. Of course I heard the story on the radio news. You might have too, but didn't pay it any mind . . . How the ship's officers thought the thieves were in Nassau, until a crew member was emptying a trash can and noticed all the English made cracker boxes. Since this was an Italian ship, staples like cookies and crackers were all Italian made. So they figured the crooks were still hidden on the ship. No passenger would have bought so many crackers, and eaten them. Crazy, a little thing like that ruining all our plans.

It wasn't my fault there was that gale blowing Friday night, so I couldn't toss the boxes over. Anyway, the ship radioed their suspicions to the New York City police and picking up Charlie and Tom was too easy—they were the only deeply tanned people leaving the ship by four. Everybody else, coming to see friends off, had a winter paleness.

Thelma, the newspapers say Charlie and Tom were extradited back to Nassau, by plane, last night. Honey, don't hate me. Try to forgive me. I swear this has taught me a lesson and I'll never pull a job again. All I want is to be with you, baby, and I know we can make it. But I'll have to stay on the run for a time. I mean, it's best I keep away from you and our apartment until after the trial. I doubt if Charlie and Tom will blow the whistle on me, but you never know what pressure the police can put on them.

I'd sure love to go back to Nassau someday, but not to do five to ten years.

I'll be in touch soon. All my love,

Your Lenny.

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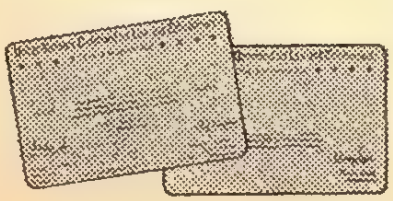

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A new JOE RODRIGUEZ adventure

MOONLIGHT OVER MALIBU

Outside, a beautiful, mindless girl danced in the moonlight. Inside, a man and a woman lay murdered. Why? And by whom? One man only knew—and he was dead!

by TOM H. MORIARTY

JOE RODRIGUEZ, rookie plainclothesman, was hard at it, trying to absorb the gist of chapter five of Abnormal Psychology, when the phone rang in his bachelor apartment on the fringes of Chavez Ravine.

The time was late afternoon. This was the best part of the day for him, for it meant free hours of study before reporting for duty.

He put down the thick volume reluctantly. He hated to cut off from the realm of ideas which tied directly into his work among the kooks, weirdos, fags, psychopaths, compulsive theives, and general egomaniacs of old Nutville-by-the-Drive-ins.

"May Day," said Lieutenant Bennett on the phone. Veteran Fred Bennett, night watch commander of Hollywood Division, Los Angeles Police Department, was calling from his own home, where an inspector from central division had reached him.

"There's been another bad slide

on Pacific Coast Highway, north of Santa Monica," Bennett explained. "At the same time, practically, the sheriff's office reports a homicide in its Malibu jurisdiction. The sheriff needs a detective right now. His people have been ticketed to the landslide area."

As he listened, Jose Juan Rodriguez looked out his south window to a roaring stream of cars and trucks on the downtown freeway Interchange, a quarter mile away. Home-going traffic, he noted, his first obstacle on this emergency assignment. Or on any assignment for that matter. Two million people seemingly drove one car each. Such mobility favored the hood getting away, not the police catching up.

He said to the lieutenant, "I could use an egg-beater—"

"Not a chance," said Bennett. "All helicopters are tied up in the slide area on traffic supervision. Try to pick up a bike officer, Joe."

After Bennett hung up, Rodriguez went to his six-foot high map of the sprawling city. He had papered a wall next to his fireplace with this out-size sales manager's type map. On the ocean side of the crouching dragon that was L.A., he noted the homicide address on Las Flores Canyon Raod.

The place was roughly off the 21200 number area of the beach road officially known as Pacific Coast Highway, Alternate 101.

He visualized the traffic jam on Sunset Boulevard near its end at the ocean, as people tried to detour around the unexpected landslide further south. He elected to take his chances on weaving through the blocked-off slide area.

A few minutes later he was at the wheel of his private-licensed car, a retired freeway pursuit Olds with radio phone equipment but now minus the official black-and-white colors, top warning lights, and siren. He entered Harbor Freeway at fifty, changed lanes four times and was up to seventy, but still could not pass the other Jim Clarks in the left outside lane. He judged that bike cops were having the same trouble, for none was in sight.

Heading towards Beverly Hills on Santa Monica Freeway, the stock car sweepstakes slowed down to forty-five. Joe signaled right to an off-ramp and soon swooped through police barricades in Santa Monica and headed north on Alternate 101.

A short distance beyond Channel Road, where L.A. took up again, Rodriguez caught his first glimpse of the disaster—in the form of a massive notch of earth missing from the lip of the one-hundred-foot high palisade landmark. Presently he slowly threaded the police detour around a pyramid of brown earth, about forty feet high and extending from the base of the cliff across to the fourth lane of the highway.

Power shovels dug at the wall of spilled rock and sandy soil. Police and sheriff's deputies ringed the area. Bullhorns bawled out instructions to newly arriving road equipment. The first order of business was to clear away the muck.

But the slides were not going to stop. Every leaky swimming pool on the plateau, every straining pressure of tomorrow's earthquake, made sure of that.

Soon Joe Rodriguez was in the northwest part of the county administered by the sheriff's office. Slide or not, sailing sloops still bobbed in the green water close to the shore, and surfers sought the key wave in the approaching twilight of setting sun.

Rodriguez now passed high-rise apartments near the Sunset Boulevard terminus, passed the Bel Air Bay Club high in the reddish rock of the palisades. Near the nike site, he turned right, up into Las Flores Canyon Road, to search for the house.

It was a large Mediterranean stucco with fortress-thick walls. The small mesa area was sparsely populated, but every home was distinctive and heavily gardened. It all suggested to Joe a homicide case in which prominent or rich people might be involved.

He spotted the number over an extensive breezeway, and drove in to be greeted by a civilian deputy in sport coat and slacks. Lieutenant Bennett had been informed correctly about the manpower shortage.

"Rodriguez," Joe introduced himself, showing his wallet with the clipped badge. "Los Angeles police."

The civilian's name was Ken Edmundsen. He was a neighbor who served as part-time deputy for the Malibu station.

He escorted Joe inside the two-story mansion and through the huge balconied center room to a private garden in the rear.

An emerald-green lawn was crossed with tanbark paths, bordered by a Technicolor display of autumn flowering plants: hibiscus on the north to get the most sun; chrysanthemums on the west wall; late-blooming bougainvillaea on the south wall; and tree roses on the east next to the house. Joe judged that the beautiful compound had been especially designed for shutting out the weekend surfing and swimming mob, as well as for gaining normal privacy.

A white sheet covered the body of a man, supine on the lawn by the side of a cast iron bench.

Rodriguez removed the sheet. The face of a fiftyish man was set rigidly in death. His eyelids had been closed by someone. Except for the rigidity and a red gash below his right ear, he could have been a stout man in Ivy League swimming drawers, taking a sunbath in his garden.

"His name is Dave Salstone,"

Edmundsen said. "He lived here with his wife, Katherine."

"Is she upstairs?"

"No. That's why the sergeant left. To take her to the hospital up the highway."

"Hysterical collapse?"

"More than that. She had been hit, too. Same type of wound on the head. But she managed to say one thing to the sergeant before she lost consciousness. She said, 'Call Doctor Meyer—get Doctor Meyer.' "

The local doctor who doubled as a medical examiner for Malibu Station had been summoned, but had not yet arrived. The first news of the assault had come in the form of a distress phone call to the Malibu Station, presumably from Katherine Salstone, which had clicked off after a hurried shout for help.

When the sheriff's men traced the number and arrived about ten minutes later, they found Dave Salstone dead on the lawn. They found his wife in the big center room, on the floor, her head bleeding.

A search of the house and a round-up of the immediate area revealed no signs of a killer or a weapon.

As the young detective returned to the house and started up the winding staircase to the series of balcony rooms, the ME arrived. He was a man whom Rodriguez had heard about: Washington Breer, a Negro doctor who had volunteered a portion of his career to the sheriff's office, thinking that he could be of value to the sparsely settled Malibu riviera.

"*Como lo pasa Vd?*" said Breer with a smile.

He should have been a detective, thought Joe wryly. Rodriguez was so much an American that he scarcely ever considered himself as looking different in any way, despite the commanding Spanish features, the flat set of eyes, and the poise of supple strength.

Rodriguez showed Breer the corpse and continued on his examination upstairs.

One master bedroom was evidently used, with twin beds; the other master bedroom was not. The clothes and effects of the Salstones had not been disturbed. Robbery was apparently not in the picture, for a jewel box disclosed a costly star sapphire ring of cornflower blue and an expensive Swiss watch pendant.

Opposite from these luxurious rooms was what appeared a servant's bedroom, nonetheless handsomely furnished. A woman's wardrobe and shoes occupied the closets. Here again, nothing had been disturbed.

Rodriguez returned to the lawn. A quick walk in the walled garden did not turn up any object which might have been the lethal weapon. The lawn bore no signs of a struggle.

"Just one killing blow from behind is my guess," said Washington Breer. "That would be from a heavy weapon with a jagged edge."

"No garden tools show up," said Joe. "I'll check out the kitchen later."

"Mr. Salstone died within the last two hours," Breer summarized.

The civilian Edmundsen now brought in a litter and assisted as stretcher-bearer with Breer to pack the body out to a sheriff's station wagon.

"*Hasta luego, José,*" said Breer.

Joe Rodriguez smiled at the subtle reminder that millions of carpetbaggers had not yet stamped out the language of the founders in the city of *Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles.*

Rodriguez now turned to Ken Edmundsen and asked about the smaller bedroom.

"I've lived next door to Dave for several years," the man said, "but I've never known of any live-in servant or of a third party guest. Of course, I did not know the Salstones well. Dave was a hermit by choice and I naturally respected his wishes."

"I saw an Oscar up there in his room on a wall bracket," said Joe. "He must have been in the movies."

"Retired producer. He was with Penta-Globe. A rare bird, the way I heard it. He made his pile and got out for reasons of health. Hedda mentioned him recently as a man she would like to see back in Hollywood."

A man people like, Joe considered. So where do you start looking for enemies who would know about this doorless compound and figure a way to take their man unawares? Rodriguez now judged that there was going to be a drouth on leads in this case.

He had better get cracking before trails were lost. He phoned in a situation report for his commander, through the desk sergeant at De Longpre and Wilcox station house, and then went to the dead man's study.

The study likewise was in orderly shape. File cases of blue-bound movie scripts, literary treatments of story basics, and correspondence were untouched. Some of the dates went back ten years. Framed souvernir photos on the walls showed no evidence of having been touched or knocked about.

II

IN THE yellow pages, Rodriguez looked up "Doctor Meyer" and found three listed, followed by four with the spelling "Meyers." He phoned all of them, though the laborious job required extra follow-up calls to track down several of the physicians at their homes and on service calls in hospitals. None had ever treated a family

named Salstone. But one of the doctors made a suggestion.

"Have you taken into consideration, Mr. Rodriguez," he said, "that there's another spelling to my name? Once a hospital clerk confused me with another doctor —a Doctor M-a-i-e-r, pronounced the same as M-e y-e-r."

Rodriguez now checked for Maier. He found one, a Dr. Ludwig Maier. When he called the office number, the physician's answering service came on the phone.

"Dr. Maier is out of town," the girl's voice said. "Is this an emergency?" She made this last remark with a wry humor in her voice and Joe wondered why.

Rodriguez identified himself as a police officer.

"You're just a telephone voice to me, buddy," she replied. "The cops cause us enough trouble as it is, figuring answering services are call girl shills."

This happened to be true, Joe knew. The rookie plain-clothesman gave her his badge number, asked her to verify him at Hollywood Division, and then phone back. In less than five minutes, the phone rang in Dave Salstone's study and the girl was on the line.

"This is Suzanne Benchley," she said, "returning your call, Mr. Rodriguez. Dr. Maier's office secretary phoned yesterday, saying the doc was flying to Hawaii for a week's vacation. Incidentally, he's a bachelor type with unlisted home number. The office is closed. Dr. Maier is somewhere in Newport Beach for the day. Extreme emergencies are to be referred to Dr. Brooks Howard in Beverly Hills. The secretary is taking the week off, too."

"Thanks, Suzanne," said Joe. "It so happens I have one of those 'extreme emergencies.' Since it's hopeless to try to locate Dr. Maier without an address in Newport Beach, I'd like the Howard number. Also the secretary's."

Joe Rodriguez had in mind extracting specific information about where to try to reach Dr. Maier in Newport Beach, about sixty miles south on Pacific Coast Highway No. 1.

The girl laughed sarcastically. "So you got an extreme emergency. Tell me, snooper, how can a patient of a psychiatrist have an extreme emergency?"

"He's a psychiatrist? No kidding."

"Say, what kind of a cop are you, Rodriguez? Doc Maier has been one of Hollywood's favorite headshrinkers since the days of Clark Gable and Carole Lombard."

Rodriguez was glad to get off the phone after this rebuke. The only psychiatrists he knew of were the ones who wrote textbooks, of which he had a total of three at home. He called Dr. Howard's office and learned that this fellow psychiatrist was also out of town,

for several days. He had the same poor luck with Dr. Maier's secretary, Selma Linton, who did not respond from her apartment, which, Joe noted, was located on Crescent Heights Boulevard, in the Santa Monica Mountains above Sunset Strip.

When he hung up, Deputy Edmundsen waited at his side. He said, "The Malibu Station just sent word that Mrs. Katherine Salstone had died. Intensive care could not save her."

Rodriguez realized at once that Dr. Maier now could well be the only person who could possibly shed light on Mrs. Salstone's dying request. Perhaps the doctor was also the only person who could shed light on the occupant of the servant's bedroom. At this point in the case, the unknown occupant was in focus as a reasonable suspect. Joe was aware that many a servant had been known to kill.

How to contact Maier? Right now that could only mean a rundown of Hawaiian flights. If the doctor had departed already, perhaps he could be reached on the national airways band, and a man of his evident stature might even get the plane to turn back.

Though a top psychiatrist, Rodriguez reasoned, Dr. Maier probably also functioned as the family consulting physician of the Salstones, who were perhaps old friends from the world of film personalities.

Rodriguez quickly eliminated United and Pan-Am in his rundown, and then reached Pacific Westways at L.A. International.

Yes, a passenger manifest did show a Dr. Ludwig Maier and his baggage was checked in at the counter. But a page call failed to reach him. Then Rodriguez got a break of a sort: flight 472A was delayed in departure, even as he waited for the page call to show negative results.

A storm front out in the Pacific was on Joe's side to the extent of an hour. Rodriguez left word for the doctor to call him on a matter of prime urgency before boarding the airplane.

Rodriguez clanked down the phone in growing frustration. Small delays irritated him. He would have to sit tight now and monitor the vital return call. In a matter of minutes it would be too dark to case the barren area beyond the garden walls for a weapon discarded, for footprints, tire tread marks, or other indications of an executed plan of ambush. Night was more the friend of criminals than of pursuers.

The departed sun now showed only a faint glow in the horizon sweep of the Pacific on this October evening. An endless stream of whizzing headlamps marked out the highway, some two hundred yards below the Salstone mansion.

The young detective went upstairs and gazed from the second

floor windows into the gloom of the rising shoulders of Las Flores Canyon Road. Edmundsen had begged off, to go to dinner. Joe reluctantly refused the man's invitation to eat with him. He could not take the chance of letting the phone go unanswered.

In twenty-five minutes, his devotion to duty was rewarded. The phone rang in the Salstone study. Joe bounded down for it.

"Lieutenant Bennett," the crisp voice came over the instrument. "When you reported in, Joe, you mentioned a doctor the lady had called for. How is his name spelled?"

"I know by now that it's spelled M-a-i-e-r—Ludwig Maier. He's the only one of that spelling in the book. Office address is Suite seventeen twenty-six dash twenty-eight Wasserman Tower, that new big building on Sunset near the Beverly Hills boundary line. His phone number is—"

"Won't need it. The other stuff checks with information in his pocketbook. Dr. Maier has left us the hard way, Joe. The landslide recovery team just dug out his car —a Bentley sedan—and he was in it, dead. The car is wrecked. But it still protected him. Looks like he died of suffocation, with injuries contributing."

"Was he next to the cliff, Lieutenant?"

"Close in. So he had to be heading north when the avalanche of rock and dirt picked him off. You'd better shag down there and see if any documents are in the car."

Rodriguez ran out to his Olds, darted into the two-way stream of traffic and began eighty m.p.h. lane changing in the southbound strip. Doing this, he flashed past a sheriff's black-and-white car, which jumped out after him like a bullfrog after a fly.

Joe now wished for a good old squad car with markings and lights. Now he appeared illegal to the barrelling black-and-white car behind him.

Not only that, but the sheriff's men had a long tradition of shooting at fugitives who paid them no mind.

He silently gave thanks to each and every driver ahead who veered right and let him through, thus building up a bank of metal and whirring tires behind him.

At the police landslide perimeter, he yelled, "Rodriguez, police," to the uniformed guards and buzzed up close to the noisy commotion of power shovels working away under floodlights. A Santa Monica PD sergeant took him to the battered Bentley, which was now being derricked on to a king-size tow truck. A CHP officer waved him in to inspect the wreckage.

The Bentley, Joe knew because he was an automobile aficionado, was actually a Rolls-Royce chassis

with different body sheet metal styling and name plate.

The Bentley had reacted worthily to disaster. The steel top was crushed down a bit in accordion folds and the triple-sandwich glass was a crosshatch of slivers, but still intact. Ordinary non-sandwich glass would have punched itself out in thousands of tiny opaque buttons of silica.

One door, the driver's, had been pried open, undoubtedly to pull out the doctor's body. Joe Rodriguez squeezed in twenty or so inches, which was as far as he could, and shone his torch on a twisted floor and ripped mohair seats.

An expensive-looking black leather briefcase was the only object visible in the tonneau. However, the back seat cushion had sprung out, covering most of the rear floor.

The CHP officer cleared the briefcase to Joe and waved the truck off, saying, "Sorry, we can't hold up things any longer. The wreck is going to the Rolls dealer, William Orpen, Limited. You'll have to check it there. Anyway, they should know best how to take the car apart."

A sealed package of what turned out to be bottled and packaged medicines with pharmaceutical labels was the only article in the briefcase. The package signalled to Rodriguez's mind the name of Dr. Brooks Howard.

If Dr. Maier trusted Howard to handle the extreme emergencies of his clients, then he may have acquainted Howard with a few highlights of possible emergency-makers. The key question still remained, however. Who was the Maier patient at the Salstones? The man Dave, his wife Katherine —or the unknown occupant of the smaller bedroom?

Rodriguez got back in his car and followed the fast tow truck, up from the shoreline to Wilshire Boulevard and then on in to the Rolls dealer east of Beverly Hills.

The night service department was open, and manned by a solitary mechanic in spotless white coveralls. He was sitting at a desk on which was a nameplate: KENDALL O'CONNOR.

He was reading a copy of the *Melbourne World* when Rodriguez drove in.

It appeared that the man had not even reacted to the arrival of the truck with its squashed Bentley and the deposit of the wreckage onto a hoist. Joe greeted him and he looked up, with a brief glance at the Bentley.

"Bit of a bruisin', wot?" the mechanic said. "Styke and eyeggs they've bloody well myde her."

"A landslide fell on it, Mr. O'Connor," said Joe. "Police would like you to pry open the left rear door for us."

"No heavy suhvis ahfter eyeght, I'm afryd."

"But what are you here for now?" said Joe.

"Counsel mowstly. Patrons inquare the proper petrols, greases, poundage of hair in tubes. Mr. William offers constant counsel."

"That's nice of Mr. William," said Rodriguez, "but we have to get that door open. This is Dr. Maier's car. Give me a crowbar and I'll do it myself."

"Doctor Maier, eh? Prince of a man. In that cyse, I'll jolly well prod her myself. Syve the spare pahts from harm."

He inserted a tire iron in the door and heaved. The door swung open to his pressure, amid a clatter of glass slivers. Joe saw that the only object covered by the dislodged rear cushion was a felt hat of greenish-mustard color, with a short-short brim and a high band of dark blue.

"The patron's skimmer," said Mr. O'Connor, indicating the hat. "I see him wear such a topper."

Rodriguez recognized the felt hat as one of English manufacture and a favorite of younger men in the movie colony. It was exactly the hat style that an older man would choose if he wanted to appear abreast of the times.

III

JOE RODRIGUEZ thanked Mr. William's Down Under mechanic, took the hat along, and returned to his car. He drove slowly back down Wilshire to the highway, thinking around the problem.

At least it was now established, Joe decided, that Dr. Maier made the fatal trip alone. There was no evidence that a passenger, better able to see danger on the right side, had jumped out of the car in the last awful seconds before doom struck at the car.

Dr. Maier may not have told his secretary that he was going to take care of a patient, prior to flying to Hawaii, Rodriguez considered. At least, the secretary had mentioned to the answering service girl only the fact of his visit to Newport Beach before going to L.A. International.

The full golden harvest moon of October was out and peering over the crest of the lofty Santa Monica Mountains as the young detective stopped his car in front of the Salstone gates. Deputy Edmundsen stepped out of the shadows to greet him.

"Situation the same," said Edmundsen. "I turned out all the lights, to discourage any neighborly curiosity."

"Good idea," said Joe Rodriguez. "Briefly, Dr. Maier is dead. His car got caught in the landslide, poor guy. Evidently he was on his way here. We'll know more when we can rouse up his associate, Doctor Howard."

"What kind of a car did Dr. Maier drive?" said Edmundsen, now alert at the news.

"Bentley sedan—what the English call a saloon."

"That's it," said Edmundsen. "I've seen a grey Bentley parked here off and on for a year or so. It has to be Maier's car. I doubt if there are a few dozen Bentleys in all California."

Since he thus visited frequently, the doctor must have had a sure-enough patient, Rodriguez speculated. The case of medicines was for that patient, of course, during the doctor's absence on the Hawaiian trip.

Rodriguez decided to give the upstairs floor another case, this time inch by inch. Ken Edmundsen would not be needed for this work. He suggested that the deputy call it a day. The relieved civilian readily agreed.

Jose Juan Rodriguez walked up the circular staircase to the balconies, with all lights in the house out.

Panels of dull gold reflection marked out the leaded-glass windows. Rodriguez walked to an opened window casement facing west. The night fragrance of yellow roses below perfumed the still air.

Moonlight on the emerald lawn, and on the colors of blooms, produced a varnished look that Rodriguez had never noted before. It was like a charming stage set, softened in key by the artistry of a master of lighting.

As Joe Rodriguez marvelled at the sight, a vision in white and cream and gold seemed to float out from the shadowed depth of the north wall.

The vision was a willowy girl in a clinging Empire gown of white-white silk. Her tanned legs were sandalled. Her hair of vivid corn-meal yellow color framed a tanned face of classic beauty. The young plain-clothesman froze, for the moment refusing to believe his startled eyes.

The girl glided across the lawn in a whisper of sound, to the banked rows of yellow roses. Now she was immediately below Rodriguez. He watched her ripple her arms out in the way of a Polynesian maid dancing the true hula of total body movement.

Jolted back to reality, he swung away from the amazing scene. Silently he returned to the staircase, down to the center room, and to the back door leading to the walled garden. The girl was by now at the north wall again and this time flit-

ting in front of cups of yellow Bohemian hibiscus blooms.

"Miss," Rodriguez said. He tried to make his voice friendly. He succeeded.

She faced him with a bright smile and awaited his approach. Joe saw that she was about five feet three inches in her sandals, and Diana-slender while full-formed in body. The curve of her back was a harp of beauty.

"Who are you?" said Joe. "This property is under police surveillance. You are not allowed here."

The girl had no answer in words. In actions she did. She slipped a hand around Rodrigue's elbow and leaned in against him. The golden hair cascaded against the detective's shoulder. It was a heady situation, but not exactly to Rodriguez's liking. He, who was dedicated to protecting such San Quentain quail, as these young fillies were pinpointed in the profession, could not exactly afford to get himself into a sticky situation.

"Whoever you are, you're a trespasser," he said. "Speak up, miss. Explain yourself."

A soprano spurt of laughter and a dash to the south wall were her reactions to his stern command.

For the moment, Joe gave up. He felt, manlike, that it would be a simple matter to catch this spirited girl and carry her out to the gate and send her on her way. But there was something ethereal about her. She was not the ordinary kook such as he was accustomed to deal with in traps on Hollywood Boulevard.

He decided to play it safe and get himself a witness for this offbeat operation. He telephoned to Deputy Edmundsen, asking the man to come back at once. As he phoned from the Salstone study, and waited, he watched through a ground floor window.

The girl still frolicked in the spotlight drench of the October harvest moon, gliding gracefully from plant to plant, as if staging a ballet of her improvising..

Ken Edmundsen came on the run. He stood with Joe Rodriguez and studied the strange production in the garden.

"She's not a neighbor kid," he said. "I know everybody on the mesa and this kook is not one of them. Probably a beach girl strayed away from the surfers."

As they talked more about the disposal of the visitor, by taking her to the Malibu Station for identification, the blonde girl entered the house, passed by the study door, and then bounded lithely up the staircase.

Rodriguez and Edmundsen ran after her.

She entered the servant's bedroom, saying to them, "Now I will sleep. Then I will go into the hills again. You may go now. Try to catch me in the hills again tomorrow."

She shut the door abruptly on

the blank states of the two men. Rodriguez had enough. He opened the door at once.

"Come along, you," he said. "We're taking you down to the sheriff's station."

"Oh, but you can't," she said. Her smile vanished. Agitation was in the green pools of eyes. "They will not allow you. Katherine will punish you."

"Is this your home?" said Joe. "Are you a relative of the Salstones?"

"I live in my garden," she said casually. "Come, I will sleep in my garden in the moonlight."

Rodriguez shook his head in bafflement. The girl appeared in some kind of fairy world of her own making. Or was she permanently locked in shock—in point of fact, was she the patient of the late Dr. Ludwig Maier? There was one way to find out.

"Get the car ready," he said to Edmundsen.

He then grasped the girl's arms, and as gently as possible he marched her down the staircase and to the gate.

At the Malibu Station, a transfer cell was the best accommodation available for Miss Moonlight, as Joe began to think of her now. Rodriguez did not care to leave her thus alone for long. He went to the communications board and got a connection with his recent phone pal of the answering service, Miss Benchley.

"Rodriguez again," he said. "Let's see what kind of a detective you are this time, Suzanne. Will you try your best to locate Dr. Brooks Howard for me? This is really important, not just an ordinary extreme emergency."

"Okay, Dad," came the answer. "If I click, I'll mail you the parking ticket to handle."

In less than ten minutes, the voice of Dr. Howard was sounding in Joe's ear. Howard was at Chasenoff's-On-the-Rocks, a high-class booze emporium outside Palm Springs. A good place for him to be, thought Joe, to receive the sad news of his friend's death in the slide.

"Ludwig never briefed me on any of his patients," Dr. Howard said. "We had our arrangements on emergencies for years, but never actually used it. We had the plan mostly as a precaution against unexpected suicide attempts by unstable personalities in show biz. The idea was that I would go to his office files for case histories and he would do likewise with my patients, when either of us was out of town."

"You know of no patient living at the Salstones, then?"

"No, although I knew Dave Salstone around Bel-Air. He and his wife were perfectly normal people. They had no children or family connections, as far as I knew."

"We found a young woman in their garden," said Rodriguez.

"She doesn't seem to be a killer type. Except for one thing. She's either a first-rate actress or she's a looney bin—"

"I'll fly right up," Dr. Howard interrupted.

Rodriguez arranged to meet the doctor at the offices of Dr. Ludwig Maier within the hour.

He hung up the phone, exhilarated. He resolved to drop in occasionally and meet some of these answering service girls in person. They sharpened a fellow up—yes, indeed, they did.

It was now eleven twenty-seven p.m. With a leeway of around twenty minutes to relax, Rodriguez lit up a cigar. He was thus cozily reviewing the image of Miss Moonlight in her flitting among the flowers when the telephone jarred him back to duty.

Lieutenant Bennett's voice was crackling.

"Did you take a briefcase out of the doctor's wrecked car?" he said.

Rodriguez quickly gave him the details of the case and contents.

"That's a relief," said the night watch commander. "Some of those medicines are highly dangerous unless used in the manner prescribed, so the doctor's office secretary says. Her name is Selma Linton. She called us and would like to get the stuff back."

"Did she say anything about who is the patient getting that medication?"

"No. I didn't take the call or I might have asked her."

"I'll follow on it," said Joe.

Rodriguez now had his chance to bring Bennett up-to-date on Miss Moonlight and his appointment with Dr. Howard. The lieutenant's only comment was a swift, "Watch yourself with those little broads, Joe."

In return, the plain-clothesman learned from Bennett that Ludwig Maier was indeed one of the leading psychiatrists to movieland people and had been a reliable source of behind-scenes help to the police in several cases involving big names.

IV

ENROUTE TO THE office building on Sunset Boulevard, Rodriguez now considered that he should have found time somehow to track down Ludwig Maier's office secretary. Here was an example of too much traffic cutting down your efficiency. You can only go one place at a time in one car, and that traffic-contest a slow one.

The woman had reacted swiftly to the news which must have chilled her blood, when she tried to recover the medicine. It was plain now that she might have been able to furnish valuable facts about the Maier patient at the Salstones. He admitted that he should have persisted in searching her out.

In Joe's book, poor timing was

unforgivable. He intended to put the question to Dr. Howard the moment he met him. Should not the secretary be asked to come down to the office and assist them in digging out file information on the Salstones?

He need not have downgraded himself so much. As he walked up to the plate-glass entrance of the locked building, a sleek, tall man of middle years was signing a register in the lobby for the attending guard. The man wore a sleeveless sports shirt of maroon Madras and olive golf slacks. The late-hours playboy type turned out to be Dr. Brooks Howard. Howard's first words after introductions ended Joe's worry.

"We're in luck," Howard said. "The guard says the secretary is upstairs, working late. That should be a help."

They took the automatic elevator and got off at the seventeenth floor. A light shone from the Maier suite on the east corridor. Beyond the glassed area they saw a woman of possibly thirtyish years, with a marking contrast line of grey hair in her boyish bush-cut black pompadour.

She looked competent, except that she was giving way to deep emotion, hunching over and wiping tears from her eyes as she sat at a desk.

It had apparently been too much, Joe judged, for her to come back alone and try to concentrate bravely amid reminders of her dead boss.

Dr. Howard said, "I'm Doctor Howard, Miss Linton, and this is Jose Rodriguez of the Los Angeles police. Let's close our minds to the tragedy, an act of God, and get to work. There's a patient out there to be saved, and you're just the one to help."

"A patient to be saved?" she said in a fumble of words and broke down crying again. Evidently, Dr. Howard had not succeeded in closing her mind to tragedy. Instead, he had escalated emotion.

The doctor waited some seconds, then as if reminded of the chief reason for his return from the Springs, asked, "Who was the patient Dr. Maier treated at the Salstone residence?"

"Salstone family," she said dully. "Old friends. David, Katherine Salstone."

Selma Linton's dark blue eyes stared intensely. She appeared to be retiring beyond normal understanding now. Joe thought of her as a person on whom a ceiling of melancholy had settled down, moving her to the point of withdrawal.

Dr. Howard looked at her closely and then went to a shelf, which contained a row of what appeared to be standard drugstore nostrums. He extracted a few pills and returned.

"Take these," he said," and rest on this couch."

"Nerve exhaustion," Howard said to Rodriguez. "A perfectly normal reaction."

In the next ten minutes the doctor and the detective opened file cases and ran down the alphabetized dossiers. There was no Salstone file. A cabinet of tape recordings, cylinders, and platters of wax and plastic, likewise revealed no tagging of the Salstone name. The only possibility of discovery lay in a group of untagged materials.

"When Miss Linton is up to it," said Dr. Howard, "we'll find out what's in the unmarked batch. Meanwhile, about that blonde girl you found in the Salstone garden, I'd suggest we get her out of the Malibu station and under better conditions for recovery and examination."

"Here in the office, for example?" said Joe.

"No, I was thinking of my own home. I have a part of the house sectioned off as an apartment. Complete security for the occasional tough case. All sharp surfaces removed. No metal. Walls and floor foam-rubbered. Windows blanked out."

"Sounds like where the little man with the white coat takes you," said Joe.

"It's not the only one in this menagerie, my friend. Frankly, it's an honorable way to prevent some quite prominent people from being rushed off to the funny house, with all the attendant police blotter publicity. I had a movie director once —fabulously successful man— who flipped and thought he was the reincarnation of Benvenuto Cellini. I got him in time and straightened him out in twenty-four hours."

Rodriguez called and made the release. Dr. Howard then gave instructions to the sheriff's officer who was to ride shotgun on the squad car delivery to Holmby Hills.

"Ask for my housekeeper, Mrs. Ohsen," Howard said. "She will direct you to the guests' apartment and handle things there on in." He repeated the address in Holmby Hills and hung up. He called Mrs. Ohsen and briefly explained the situation.

'Now I feel better about things," he said to Joe Rodriguez. The way you described that girl, she was in hypertension, perhaps unaccustomed, and quite capable of violence if her will was opposed by a nonsympathetic personality, such as a jail attendant."

The men returned to their search of file cards and case records, in typed or voice repro form. When no results showed, Rodriguez thought it about time to nudge Miss Linton again. He went to her and saw that she was now worse, twisting in pain on the couch and holding her head.

Dr. Howard said, "She's better off home. This atmosphere and the late hour defeat medication."

Rodriguez assisted the woman to her feet.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll be all right. My car's downstairs. I live close by."

Seeing her walk slowly towards her Alpine Sunbeam in the parking lot, he felt a glow of relief.

Joe pitched in again on the search for a Salstone file. Dr. Howard found it hard to believe that there was no record whatsoever of such a patient. They worked furiously at the records.

"The old rascal!" Howard said at length with a smile." He probably made no charges on this case, kept it hush-hush, to preserve his image and avoid gossip. You know, anything free in Hollywood has an odor attached to it." Howard wiped his forehead and drifted to the phone to call his housekeeper.

Rodriguez took a breather, sitting down with a hot-burning stogie in his mouth. Thus coasting, the grey cells caught up with a thing he had been subconsciously trying to remember: the package of medicine in the briefcase and the necessity to turn it over to Dr. Howard.

If Dr. Maier had left a memo inside the package pertinent to the use of the drugs, there was an outside chance that the patient's name might be included. At least, the drugs themselves might provide sufficient evidence to a doctor as to the youth or age or sex of the recipient.

Rodriguez went to the briefcase and opened it. The package of medicines was gone.

Howard was still talking on the phone. Joe thought hard. He was certain that he had not opened the briefcase since leaving Malibu Station to meet Dr. Howard. He had looked into the briefcase there, then put it next to the mustard-green hat in the orderly room. This meant that the Moonlight Girl herself could easily have stolen the package while he was occupied around the station with the arrangements for her temporary custody.

Well, it was too late to do anything about it now, he decided. The Moonlight Girl was enroute to the Howard home and its private stockade.

Rodriguez felt low, waiting for Dr. Howard to hang up the phone. When the doctor cradled the phone he turned to Joe and said:

"The girl is safe and sound in the apartment. I've just instructed Mrs. Ohsen how to tranquilize her if needs be. Joe, it's getting late and we're getting nowhere. Maybe we'd better call it off and get a fresh start in the morning. The secretary will be back to normal and able to help us intelligently. If we tried to run off this mass of recordings, it would take all night to make a dent in the pile. Be damned dull stuff listening to, to boot."

Since Dr. Howard had left his Rolls Royce at the Palm Springs airport, and had come to the office building by cab, Rodriguez offered to drive him home. Before doing

so, they decided to drop in at an all-night chili parlor on the Strip.

It was past two o'clock in the morning when Rodriguez headed the Olds into a broad driveway behind thick walls in the Holmby Hills residential park, to deposit the doctor at his door.

"Wait!" Howard shouted. "Look—my door is wide open."

Joe Rodriguez jumped out and padded to the door, with his service .38 out front at the ready. A light shone in the hallway. All was quiet. Dr. Howard pointed up the circular staircase of the great columned hallway. The upper floor was alight.

Joe motioned Howard to wait, and swiftly traversed the lower floor, finding no one and no evidence of thieves having ransacked rooms. He hurried back to the doctor and motioned him to follow up the stairs.

The rooms with lights on were similarly in good order, as below.

"The apartment is here," said Howard, pointing.

Rodriguez gently pushed the door. In the reception foyer of this separate apartment unit, a picture was aslant on a wall and a chair was overtuned. Beyond the foyer, the living room was a shambles.

V

DR. HOWARD ran to the bedroom, with Joe Rodriguez at his heels. A woman was prone on the studio bed. Blood trickled out of the bun of her prim grey hair.

"Mrs. Ohsen," said Howard. He felt her pulse, looked up in anguish, and said, "Dead."

Rodriguez quickly checked the lone closet and found it empty; he looked under the studio bed and in the adjoining bathroom. There was no sign of the girl. she had arrived only with the clothes she wore and now girl and clothes had vanished, leaving no trail.

A small blue hand-towel caught Rodriguez's eye. It rested on the tile in a little heap under the rack where normally it would hang with other towels.

Joe felt its damp texture, and flipped it over, disclosing a blurred smear of red. Evidently someone had gone about removing a splatter of blood. Mrs. Ohsen's blood? Such a fact, if confirmed by the lab, could have but one terrible implication, Joe knew.

As for the terrible mistake of leaving the briefcase within the Moonlight Girl's reach, Joe felt that he alone was responsible. No telling what drugs she had swallowed. He felt sick at heart as he went out of the room to call Lieutenant Bennett at the station house.

When he finished giving the night watch commander the very barest details, and when Photo Joe and the Fuller Brush Man were on the way in a meat wagon, the veteran Bennett had his say, and it wasn't pleasant to hear.

'You allowed that girl to go out of police custody," said Bennett coldly. "That's bad, real bad. I thought you had more judgment than to permit a suspect to be lodged in a private bug house. Oh, yes, you could trust the headshrinker, you'll say to the board of inquiry, but the fact of the matter is that the doc was not there in person, nor were you there, and look what happens."

The lieutenant stopped talking abruptly, and Rodriguez felt the ominous silence as a file rasping his neck. The lieutenant then continused. "And besides, Rodriguez, young plainclothesmen will be wise not to chauffeur young females around in their nightgowns. I was just talking to Malibu station. They asked me what TV serial you were on."

"Yes, sir," said Joe Rodriguez softly.

If he had half a leg to stand on, he would have spoken up about the speed of the operation, the lack of time all through, and the risk of unattended solitary confinement for the girl at Malibu. But he knew he was wrong.

"Is that all you got to say for yourself?"

"Yes, sir," said Joe.

"Okay, then. You can get back in the detective business again. Go back to that doctor's office—the late Dr. Maier's, that is. Frank Kelly will be waiting for you. He's got a little recording cylinder. We want to see if it ties in, so hear what it says."

Joe Rodriguez was saying rapidly, "Where did you find it?", when the phone banged in his ear.

He asked Dr. Howard to go back to the office with him. There were things the doctor could explain, if technical terms were part of the little recording cylinder.

In Dr. Maier's office, Kelly, a specialist on matters electrical, including wire-taps, was rigging up the smallest of an array of playback instruments.

"This little old-fashioned cylinder," said Kelly, "it's like the kind on the victrola that the dog listens to. Well, believe it or not, we found such an old-timer recorder behind a walnut panel on the dashboard of that Bentley, and what looked like an ornamental air vent was the voice in-take and its button to start dry battery power. The lieutenant

thinks two and two might make five. He could be right, because I found a supply of these little cylinders in the cabinet here. Okay, let's listen."

Kelly flicked the switch and the wax cylinder revolved on its center axis. He touched the diamond needle to the scoring. A scratchy sound cleared up swiftly and resolved into a weak and laboring human voice: "This is Ludwig Maier—"

Dr. Howard whispered, "It's his voice."

The voice continued: "Thank God this car is made of heavy steel and safety glass. I know you will dig me out alive. There is no further buckling of the roof. No noise. I am getting a little air, thank God. My guardian angel made me yank the steering wheel to the right side of the road. There is some crack of air, some channel between the rocks and the side of the cliff. My legs are paralyzed. I cannot move. My nose was crushed when I hit the wheel.

"It is now completely dark except for the luminous glow of the clock hands. With my right hand I have successfully found the panel button and turned on my recorder. It is reassuring to have this device to record my thoughts. Should I black out from trauma, my reactions in this emergency will be a matter of record for me to analyze later—a clinical advance. I must say I showed foresight when I had the Rolls people install the instrument. Perhaps Fate intended this machine to be ready for my terrible ordeal of waiting here. It is now four-twelve by the clock. I must conserve strength and oxygen. I will sign off now. . . ."

A click was followed by silence for a second. Almost immediately came another click and Dr. Maier's voice—much weaker this time.

"I have been dozing," the voice said. "Unconscious, perhaps. Over an hour. It is now five-thirty-six on the clock . . . I am weak and full of pain. There is no noise outside. Do they know I am covered by the landslide? Good Lord, tell me that I am not buried beyond hope of ever getting out . . ."

A pause of almost a minute recorded a moan and a muted cry of despair. The voice took up again.

"I cannot move my right arm any more. I must let the machine run. I may be found dead. I must face up to it like a man.

"Thank God for this machine. I am still able to take care of certain grave obligations which to me are matters of personal honor. In all frankness, much of what I am going to tell has been closely guarded in my mind before. But now I have no choice and I must reveal these secrets if I am to do justice to the people involved—yes, if I am to be worthy of the name *doctor*. To whomsoever my words may first reach, I ask man-to-man that you respect the confidential nature of my remarks. Just contact the peo-

ple concerned and then forget me.

"To my friend Dr. Howard—Brooks Howard of Holmby Hills—I now address myself. I was on my way to the Dave Salstones. I ask you to substitute for me. My patient there is a woman named Paula Page. Twenty-eight years old. Her real name is Paula Rauchning. She chose to be known as Paula Page when she aspired to become a singer and actress. She is my niece, my only relative.

"The poor girl's mind broke under the tyranny of heavy study discipline in literature, dramatics, and music, and the sudden loss of both parents, my brother-in-law and my sister, his wife.

"Paula lives at the Salstones because Dave Salstone had marked her college progress when he was active as a Hollywood producer. Dave felt that she had a kind of wild genius which would certainly be recognized and hailed by the public. The Salstones are kindly people. They volunteered to have her live with them when they learned that she would otherwise have to be committed to an institution.

"They are such priceless friends. They saved me from the embarrassment of not having cured my own relative. In this way, Paula was shut off from the world and given every benefit of psychiatry and modern medicine in my power to offer. You will thus understand, Brooks, why this woman was my personal patient and unknown to the world.

"The medication and instructions are contained in my briefcase in this car. I will not take precious time to describe the reasons for the dosages. You will know when you study the list. You need only make a call on the Salstones once a week for observation—starting at once, of course. Katy Salstone will handle things in between, as she has done so well in the past.

"The mind of Paula Page is still deranged. She is still in reversion to a teen-age child's ways. But I have hopes that she is on the verge of snapping back to reality. I sense that already she understands many things, but thus far is powerless to acknowledge them. I accomplished this condition by gradual indoctrination. For example, I took her to the Rose Gardens in Exposition Park and had her pick her favorite flowers for planting in the Salstone garden. Of clinical record, the golden-bloom Bohemian hibiscus variety pleased her most. And the Mrs. E. P. Thom yellow rose. There is a marked feeling for the color of yellow in her life."

A noise of labored breathing now roughed up the flow of sound. Then the voice of Dr. Maier resumed in pinches of speech.

"Internal injuries," he said. "I am now feeling the protest of brutalized blood circulation, malfunctioning nervous system, sharp twinges all over my body. I think I

have gone blind, for I cannot see the luminous hands of the clock any more. Let me hurry. Let me tell it all. As I said, I have no choice but to talk openly, lest harm or injustice be done to people I love.

"My will is locked in the office safe. I leave to my niece a fourth of my estate, a half to the University Hospital at Ann Arbor, and an appropriate sum to my secretary, Miss Linton.

"I direct Miss Linton to destroy the manuscript of my former cases in my safe.

"The manuscript is in a dossier, together with the sum of one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars in currency. I have no desire any longer to profit by the secrets, the foibles, of my patients. Miss Linton is to burn the manuscript personally, and turn over the cash to the trust officer of the Sunset Security bank for inclusion in the estate funds.

"Wait. There is yet need for a more honest clarification. When I said 'an appropriate sum' to Miss Linton, I was subconsciously trying to avoid the whole truth. I have admired Selma Linton from the first day she came to work for me. I admired her as a gallant woman and an associate. She reciprocated my feelings. She inspired me, made me young again. We were going to be married, but now that will undoubtedly never be. She is flying to Hawaii right now, for she was taking a different flight than mine. We were to be married quietly there.

"People will say that I am more than twice her age. Let them. Many December and May marriages have worked out. I have assured my niece as much, for I have been a father image to her and I have delighted in talking freely to her as part of helpful therapy. She smiled approval when I told her what was in my mind. Paula loves Selma Linton for Selma's kindnesses to her.

"So now I have told all. To Miss Linton I bequeath the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars. which will enable her to go back to college and become a doctor in her own right. She served me well and I am only sorry that we cannot be together as man and wife. She will understand. She will regain happiness with her work and her home interests.

"In consideration of taking up psychiatric care of Paula Page, I hereby stipulate that Dr. Brooks Howard receive, in addition to his normal fees, the sum of—"

A sound of light scratching carried on, with no intimation of a voice to resume. The scratching became a terrifying and lonely sound.

Franklin Kelly lifted the needle, examined the wax cylinder, and turned off the instrument.

"Those were his last words," said Kelly. "Poor guy, he seemed to want to do what was right, right to the end."

"That he did," said Howard.

"Now I'll have something to go on when we catch up to the new Paula Page—the murderous Paula Page, that is. A pure case of a schizophrenic—a victim of gross severe mental and physical stress—suddenly turning manic by the unfortunate temporary absence of proper controlling medication. I'm afraid the doctor's niece has signed her own commitment papers to an asylum for the criminally insane."

Joe Rodriguez scarcely heard the words. He had formed a layman's opinion, somewhat similar, as the voice of Dr. Maier came back from the dead. He knew that LAPD, county, and state agencies were already hot in the chase-down of Paula Page, and there was nothing that he could do that was going to add much to their team efforts.

VI

RODRIGUEZ called Hollywood Division, filled Lieutenant Bennett in with quick highlights of the recording, and then learned details of the dragnet. The ring of surveillance around Paula Page had been formed from Holmby Hills to Hollywood proper and from Sunset Boulevard to Wilshire Boulevard.

In about twenty-five minutes, Rodriguez and Bennett, in a squad car with Kelly at the wheel, wound up into the steep streets approaching the lower canyon cul de sacs of the Santa Monica Mountains. Their destination was a terrace garden apartment on Crescent Heights Boulevard, a place midway into an area of walled street sides, trees, and gardened small estates.

"Pretty nifty place for a secretary," said Bennett. "Maybe the doc had been playing house with her. He probably paid her well."

They stopped before an address that at first seemed all trees in front, so heavily camouflaged was the rambling complex of apartments. Selma Linton lived in 8-B. A glassed-in map for the convenience of visitors showed that this unit was still higher on the slope, and again almost hidden by foliage.

"A doctor's secretary surely can't mind being awakened at four o'clock in the morning," said Bennett. "Twenty-five gee's will make up for a lot."

"I hope we get the right place," said Rodriguez. "Do you see a doorway in this forest?"

Rodriguez stepped closer to the moonlit hulk, but saw no door. He tried the left side of the house, with no results. He motioned his boss and Kelly to the other side.

When he followed them into the heavy going of vines and trees, Joe ran smack into Fred Bennett's rigid back.

"Look," the lieutenant whispered.

A wavering light, as of a candle in a breeze, appeared faintly in the rear of the back garden. A shadow moved across the light every few seconds. Joe thought that some

prowler had been ironically discovered. No one in his right mind, such as a servant or a craftsman, would be out working in a dark garden at this time, several hours before dawn.

Kelly whispered, "Shall I cuff him?"

Bennett said, "No. Joe, you check it out."

Rodriguez was aware that his stealth—the catlike steps of a young man in good physical shape, was what Bennett counted on. Joe skirted out into the full flush of moonlight in one patch of lawn, then stole forward under the tree branches.

As the glow of the wavering light came closer, the young detective saw it to be from a small camper's lamp, set on a stand, with the face of its shrouded glass directed at a person with a shovel. The swing of shoulders went above a sizable planter box, such as used to raise masses of cut-flowers in home gardens. Dirt cascaded on to the nearby bank of a rising terrace level.

Rodriguez decided that the moment had come to solve the riddle of the night gardener, no matter whether he would unmask an honest though eccentric worker or a prize nutball.

"What's up here?" he said and hurried in to the lamps fringe of light.

The grey-banded bush-cut hair of Dr. Maier's secretary picked up a trace of moonlight as she jerked around. Her dark blue eyes stared back the horror of unexpected discovery.

She bolted out of the light, past Rodriguez, lunging as if blind in the moonlight. Officer Kelly waited, with arms spread out like a football line-backer. The principal noise that came to Joe's ears was the jingle of handcuffs as Kelly pinned the woman to the lawn.

Rodriguez yanked away a patch of cloth from the lamp, at once lighting up the area of the big planter box. A beautiful blonde girl in a clinging Empire gown lay stretched on the terrace, supine, her tanned arms straight at her sides, her eyelids closed.

It was Paula Page — Paula Rauchning Page—and evidently she was a candidate for burial in the box. Exactly why, Joe Rodriguez had not time to reason out.

The secretary had impressed him as a woman physically stronger by far than the average of her sex. She was fully capable of lugging Paula Page from apartment 8-B to this garden sepulchre.

Rodriguez dropped to his knees. A tiny throb of heart action came to his ear. He jumped up and ran to Lieutenant Bennett, who was trying to revive the unconscious secretary on the lawn.

"Paula Page," he said to Bennett and jerked a thumb to the upper garden. "I think she's still alive." Then he started back to the squad

car, to request a fire department inhalator truck.

Bennett called after him, "Get Doctor Howard up here too. Put surveillance on Dr. Maier's office."

A little later, as Joe waited on the street level and heard the howl of sirens from the approaching inhalator truck, light flashed on in the terrace entrance. It was the apartment manager, trying to figure out what kind of monkey business was going on now.

In answer to the man's question, Rodriguez said evenly, "A heart attack case," and let it go at that. There was no sense in stirring up the neighborhood. There were enough lights on as it was, around the coils of the hillside.

Joe soon led the stretcher bearers with their oxygen bottles and pump bladders into the back garden and to the motionless girl by the planter box. He saw her green eyes open and widen as the experts jumped to their work.

Bennett and Kelly were inside the apartment by now and had lit all the lights. Rodriguez went into the modern studio set-up and was struck by the soft quality of the decor: chintz in splashy patterns on lustrous maple pieces, repros of French landscapes of the Monet school, cloissoné figurines, a white piano.

Bennett sat before his quarry on a plain kitchen chair, facing her on a delicate love seat.

Bennett said harshly, "I was on

a case like this in nineteen forty-five. They called it The Red Thumb Gardener Murders. A tough old spinster planted two victims in her backyard garden and raised pelargoniums over their remains. Come on, Miss Linton. Let's have the details."

Rodriguez, or anybody within twenty feet for that matter, could hear the blunt veteran's harangue and questioning, so the young detective went about a silent casing of the big room as he listened. The tastes of a criminal were always interesting to him. They told a lot about the person without saying a word.

In the north wall, he came upon a white and gold desk, in the niche of an alcove library. Her work

desk, Joe judged. Where a secretary, who had confidential knowledge, he considered, could sit up nights planning how to speed up her marriage to an older employer who, if he died before the ringing of the marriage bells, legally planned to favor a niece, a young girl who was about to be returned to the ranks of the sane.

On the desk pad calendar, Rodriguez spotted a notation in grease crayon. *"Lunch P. Page here next office visit."* This could indicate a step in building up the friendship between secretary and patient, as seemingly sought by Dr. Maier in connection with his therapy, and also, perhaps with the projected December-May marriage.

Rodriguez sat himself down at the desk and opened the drawers one by one.

In a lower big drawer he came upon a leather binder, on which a pasted tab carried the simple title, "LUDWIG MAIER—*Manuscript.*" Joe's pulse raced. He flipped to the first page and read a half dozen lines of ballpoint script:

"Some years ago the world of entertainment was saddened by the apparent suicide of a rising young film star, Edomar Foronacci, the man of many faces. Mystery surrounded his death, for he was supposedly healthy, energetic, and ambitious to succeed to greater heights. The presence of powerful tranquilizing drugs in his bachelor quarters was made known and influenced the inquest jury. Inasmuch as I, and I alone, know that Mr. Foronacci was incapable of taking his own life, the reader may—"

Rodriguez closed the book, with speculation that the secretary had been entrusted with Maier's secret project for some time. Here was the manuscript which Dr. Maier wanted burned. Did she have it home to type up?

He delved further in the desk drawers, came upon a large manila envelope, sealed with masking tape. Joe Rodriguez slit the tape and drew out a two-inch stack of thousand dollar bills—each bill new, crisp, and embellished with a portrait of Grover Cleveland.

Then a small red notebook turned up and bafflement began.

The first page was half-filled with hard-to-read scribbling, and that was all the writing in the entire book. Joe Rodriguez read and pondered. The writing seemed to say, "Dr. M. 4:30 p.m. Call Miss Linton—change her appntmnt, to three. Dress size ten."

The thing that bugged Joe, of course, was the fact of a secretary writing notes to herself. This he could scarcely believe. He could only interpret the notes as having been written by Paula Page, who had laboriously put down things to do herself in anticipation of a visit at the Salstone home by both the doctor and his secretary. For example, Miss Linton was to have been notified, by someone, to

come to the Salstones at three ahead of the doctor who would arrive at four-thirty.

The secretary had taken the patient's own notebook for safekeeping—that is, for hiding. It appeared to be proof that Paula Page, now able to write down simple things, was indeed on her way back to sanity. If so, an enemy would want such proof destroyed.

Rodriguez hurried to the other end of the room, where he saw that Lieutenant Bennett was now red in the face with rage as the girl refused to answer his questions.

"She'll talk when she hears this," said Joe. "The manuscript, the one Dr. Maier ordered her to burn and which supposedly was in the safe, is in her desk over there. So is the money, full amount. The will itself hasn't shown up yet."

"Good," said Bennett. "Joe, get a policewoman up here as fast as you can. I expect some trouble carting this broad off to the station."

VII

JOE RODRIGUEZ went to the telephone. As he was completing his call, he looked out the window at a moving object in the trees and saw Dr. Howard arriving, accompanied by a red-headed young woman. Rodriguez went to the door to save Howard the trouble of searching for the nearly hidden entrance.

"I got smart and brought my secretary this time," said Dr. Howard. "When it comes time to testify I want to have names, places, and times right on the button." He introduced Rodriguez to a Miss Joan Bach, a neat little trick with grey eyes.

To Bennett, Howard said gravely, "We've pulled Paula Page through. Stomach pump. Counteracting medicines. And the shock of it all has worked for her, not against her. As Maier desired, she may snap back mentally. Whether that's good or bad for her, from her standpoint in court, is not for me to say. But it's a relief at least to have a known murderess alive."

Relief, no fooling, thought Joe: relief to Dr. Howard undoubtedly, when you remembered what the lieutenant had said about unofficial private care of people with temporarily deranged minds.

Miss Linton heard Dr. Howard's words. Hearing, she decided to talk. A little bit, at least. She said to Bennett," You see, I didn't hurt her at all. But you wanted me to admit I did. You wanted to pin her crime on me."

As she said this, she stood up and a squirm of contempt twisted her mouth. She was a strong girl, no question of that, Joe thought. Strong of mind and strong of body. His gaze measured the rack of her shoulders, the wiry arms which had been strong enough to spade up earth. Absorbed in studying her almost mannish physique, Rodriguez's thoughts suddenly reflexed

to the message written in the red notebook.

So Miss Linton was big, was strong. How big, how strong? Rodriguez's mouth tightened in self disgust. Why hadn't he thought along these lines before, he scolded himself.

He went to the sleepy-lidded Joan Bach, who was even now plying her secretarial skill by transcribing the conversation on a shorthand pad.

"Miss Bach," said Joe softly, to her alone, "what size dress would you say Miss Linton here wears?"

"A sixteen," the red-head replied. "She'd burst the seams out of a fourteen with a figure like that. Dress sizes are a matter of proportion, not necessarily height."

Joe looked at her appraisingly and said, "No offense, but what size do you wear?"

"I'm a size ten," she said with assurance.

"I would have bet on it," said Joe wryly.

He snapped his fingers and moved at once to the side of the Maier secretary. When out of range of her gaze in the rear, he spoke up sharply.

"Paula Page," he said.

The girl swung around to face him, forming her lips as if about to say, "Yes?"

"There it is," said Joe Rodriguez to Bennett. "She's tripped herself up by the simplest trick in the bag. The note I found will explain it. Her fingerprints will surely corroborate it at the Salstone home.

This woman is Paula Rauchning Page. Dr. Maier told us in his death statement that she was on the verge of snapping back to sanity, if not already capable of understanding. The secretary Selma Linton is the girl I found in the moonlight in the Salstone garden. But no one was alive who could identify either Paula Page or Selma Linton—"

Joan Bach interrupted, saying, "I talked to Miss Linton on the phone several times. This person does not have the soft, kind of furry tone of voice that I remember."

"Keep talking, Joe," Bennett broke in savagely. "What's your reconstruction? It better be good."

"Paula Page here, she's taken over Selma Linton's home. We know that she had met Selma. It's possible that she visited with her here, as part of Dr. Maier's master plan of re-establishing normal contacts for his patient. She knew how to get here and what was here. She knew of Selma Linton's enthusiasm for gardening. Then Paula learned from recent conversation with her uncle that Miss Linton was going to be her future aunt-in-law, or whatever you call an uncle's wife. In other words, a younger woman unexpectedly destroying her expectations of a big inheritance. Paula Page built up a deep resentment over this new and unwanted state of affairs. The side effects of certain drugs could—"

Dr. Howard interposed, saying, "Side effects of certain combinations of drugs cannot be uniformly predicted. The reactions can be, say like smoking marijuana. Pot ordinarily induces dreamy elation, but it can also spark unreasonable violence."

"Therefore," Joe continued, "Paula Page acted fast to protect her interests. Experts on abnormal psychology tell us that fear not only can dull or stifle the mind but can also sharpen the mind. Paula Page arranged by phone, whether she called or had Katherine Salstone call, for Selma Linton to come to the Salstones earlier yesterday. She knew that Dr. Maier was leaving for Hawaii shortly after visiting her. The doctor had previously told her he would bring the week's medication. The doctor may have told her in so many words that he was to be married to Selma the very next day in Hawaii.

"Miss Linton arrived at the Las Flores Canyon Road address early. It seemed a natural thing to the Salstones, who knew of the friendship of the girls. So Miss Linton arrived and she was as promptly overpowered by force up in the bedroom of this strong young woman here, Paula Page. Paula Page had indeed snapped back. She now concentrated a surge of hatred upon people she thought were standing in her way—upon the unsuspecting Salstones. She bludgeoned Dave Salstone with a heavy and sharp-edged garden tool, such as a hand mulcher, and injured Katherine Salstone the same way.

"In Katherine's state of shock, Paula escaped with Miss Linton. She did this by drugging Miss Linton. She knew that the girl would be reacting, reverting to childish ways from the severe shock of assault and drugs—"

"So far, so good," said Bennett," but how did she get into the office safe? She wasn't the secretary with confidential information."

"Paula forced the drugged Miss Linton to give the information and materials she needed: the combo of the safe which she had seen on office visits, the key to the office. She then dropped off Miss Linton in a lonely patch of Malibu hills. She rushed back to the office.

"She signed in, using Miss Linton's name on the building register. Then we found her and she appeared too overcome to be of any use to anybody. It was an act, I say. Nevertheless, we talked freely and she heard us. She knew now that Selma Linton had been rushed for safekeeping to the private

apartment in the home of Dr. Howard.

"She knew the address and she also knew her way around Holmby Hills.

"She must have felt that she was in great luck. She could now remove all evidence of guilt. She could destroy the will, keep the money that came from the office safe, and later on sell the manuscript, in her unchallenged role of Selma Linton.

"Much was at stake and it gave her added strength of mind and body. So she went boldly to Dr. Howard's house in Holmby Hills—after stealing the medicine package, I am sorry to admit, from the Maier briefcase—and bluffed her way in. She killed Mrs. Ohsen, probably with the same murder tool from Malibu. Once again she influenced the drugged Miss Linton to come along with her to this apartment. She was about to get away with it, too—"

Bennett had been listening closely. He now said, "I'll buy that tentatively, Joe. Principally because this woman's actions of trying to bury a live person were witnessed. But there are also three locations where prints can show you right. There are also two exhibits where handwriting may confirm it."

Paula Page looked away in despair. Her face went white with fear and admittance, apparently, of defeat. "Fingerprints," she said scornfully. "Mishmash. What fools you are. They won't hurt me. Nor handwriting—"

"But size ten dress, that will," said Rodriguez.

He took out the red notebook. In other words, you decided to play it safe and have an untraceable dress ready to fit Miss Linton so she could be taken out of the Salstone house in a kind of disguise, without creating suspicion. But Dr. Howard's secretary here tells me no lady wrestler is ever going to fit into a size ten. And Miss Linton is undoubtedly a size ten, the same general statistics of Dr. Howard's secretary Joan Bach."

"My friend Ludwig described his niece," said Dr. Howard," as having a kind of wild genius. Such people are intensively imaginative. She could have planned as Jose Rodriguez states."

"Then," said Bennett," it could be a nail-down proof of intent to defraud, and commit grand theft, mayhem, and murder. Joe, while I take Paula Rauchning Page in to the station and book her, you and this young lady—Miss Size Ten, did you say?—take an inventory of sizes of women's dresses in the closets of this apartment. Then take a run out to Malibu and check the clothes in that second bedroom. If they're not—repeat, not—size sixteen or fourteen at Malibu, call me."

Joe Rodriguez had no reason to call the lieutenant an hour later. So he did not. Instead, he sat on a

driftwood log on the damp beach of Malibu with the red-headed Miss Size ten. Joan Bach and he shared a quart of sparkling burgundy, which Joan just happened to come upon in the kitchen while helping the young detective search in vain for the murder weapon.

So they drank up the pink fizz and watched the harvest moon of October turn back to glittering gold once more. Jose Juan Rodriguez thought then that it might be a good idea to put aside the *Abnormal Psychology* book back at Chavez Ravine and study up a bit on women —their separate world of intuition, of illogical behavior, but also of occasional practical actions.

He was certain that he would have a hip young teacher here ready to instruct him—this time at Chasenoff's-on-the-Rocks, outside of Palm Springs.

NEXT MONTH—TWO EXCITING SHORT STORIES

THE DIRK

An Off-Trail Thriller

by DENNIS LYNDS

He had taken my fortune, my woman, everything I desired out of life. I—I had nothing but my hate and a deadly knife—and a knowledge that I would use it well.

THE ASSASSIN

A Thrilling Story

by HARRY WHITTINGTON

They had mocked at prison bars, bought and murdered their way into a fearsome empire of evil. Now nothing stood in their way —nothing but five dedicated assassins!

JUSTICE BE DAMNED!

by MORRIS HERSHMAN

Everybody, including a jury,
said Rod was not guilty.
Everybody—but one . . .

FOR A CRIMINAL, luck consists of getting the lawyer best able to win his case. If ever a case looked hopeless the Rodney J. Miller case did.

After a police patrolman found Miller cowering in a building, Miller mumbled something about having killed his partner accidentally. He gave some details, too; and the Miller case seemed sewed up.

On second thoughts, though, Miller did something intelligent. He hired Norman Britten, a good lawyer, a man with plenty of experience in criminal cases, who loved the hot glare of publicity around a murder trial.

"Good publicity can save you," this paragon told his client at the first interview. "Jurors and newspaper readers love scandal, rivalry of one sort or another. Conflict."

"This was only a business matter," Miller said. "Each of us thought he was being cheated, and it looks as if I won. I didn't mean to kill him, though."

"Accidents are too dull," Britten said thoughtfully. "Look here! Are you married?"

"Yes, but my wife wouldn't want to have anything to do with me now. She's very strait-laced."

"Before the killing, were you and your wife living together? Good. The people, and by that I mean the prospective jurors who

read newspapers, want sex stories most of all. Claim the unwritten law as your motive. Your partner was two-timing you with your wife."

"But he only met her once!" Miller protested. "Besides, he was eighty-five years old."

"Give 'em the unwritten law and you'll get a verdict of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. People will thank you for what you did."

"But my partner was blind in one eye," Miller said doubtfully. "He walked with a cane."

"Give 'em the unwritten law, Mr. Miller. The unwritten law wins out every time."

"My wife will hit the ceiling. She's got a vicious temper, and she never forgives an insult."

"Give 'em the unwritten—"

Miller was smart enough to do what his lawyer told him. At a special press conference next day, he gave reporters his new story. His partner was betraying him with his wife, Miller now said piteously. He'd have said so in the past, he added plaintively, but nobody had asked him.

"I love my wife," Miller finished in a harrowing voice that he'd spent hours to get perfect. "I'd gladly take her back today."

Mrs. Miller came to see her husband later on, but it wasn't forgiveness for an imaginary transgression that she wanted. She was a woman built on the lines of an early aircraft carrier, and her eyes looked as if they could crack walnuts.

"I won't have this," Mrs. Miller said. "I demand a retraction."

"For heaven's sake, Vangie," Miller told his wife. "I'm trying to save myself."

"Not at my expense," Mrs. Miller insisted. "If you don't retract that story of yours right away, I—I'll get even somehow, I swear."

"I'm sorry, Vangie."

"Not yet you aren't! But you will be."

Holding a press conference on her own later on, Mrs. Miller denied everything and said that she hoped her husband would get the long prison term he deserved for the killing of his partner.

It should hardly be necessary to discuss the trial. It is familiar to all newspaper readers. It was a walkaway for Miller's lawyer. Miller, basking in the comfortable glow that comes with the knowledge that the lawyer who represents you is as crooked as a three-lane highway, sat back and waited calmly for the not guilty verdict that was sure to follow.

He had to wait for three days.

He was shaking hands with members of the audience as he started outside after the acquittal, his lawyer following at a discreet distance. Britten noticed Evangeline Miller in the crowd, but she seemed preoccupied only with getting away from the old-fashioned courthouse building.

At the head of a long flight of marble steps that would take him down to street level, Miller was asked if he could make any statement for the press.

"I can only say that I am thankful to have been vindicated," Miller remarked, "and that my story is now known to be the entire truth."

There was a bellow of rage in the audience, and Mrs. Miller came rushing at her husband. He called out, lost his balance and toppled headfirst down the long flight of stairs. A doctor pronounced him dead shortly after he hit bottom.

Somebody asked her, "Why did you kill him?"

"It was an accident," Mrs. Miller insisted sincerely as the police surrounded her. "An accident! I didn't mean to kill him."

"Nobody'll believe that."

A change came over Mrs. Miller's hard face, and she looked almost apologetically down to where her husband's body lay. Then she stiffened her shoulders and said:

"It was true about my cheating on him! He killed the only man I ever really loved, so I killed him."

And she looked around calculatingly to see how much better this story was going over than the truth. She seemed satisfied by that, in a grim way.

Rodney Miller's lawyer, who was standing nearby, nodded approvingly.

Every criminal lawyer, whether he knows it or not, has an idea of what his dream client should be.

This cookie answered a lot of the qualifications. She had the hardness of a brass monkey and she could think fast on her feet. She was the kind who could make headlines and give an ulcer to a D.A., all at the same time.

Britten wasn't likely to get the case, but it made him glad to see a defendant who knew how to handle herself.

NEXT MONTH'S NEW U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL:

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Elmer Wheeler, known as "Mr. Sizzle" to millions of salesmen around the world, is always in great demand for speaking engagements. Early in his career Elmer took as his motto "Don't sell the steak—sell the sizzle," and turned it into an imposing business philosophy with a string of successes to prove it.

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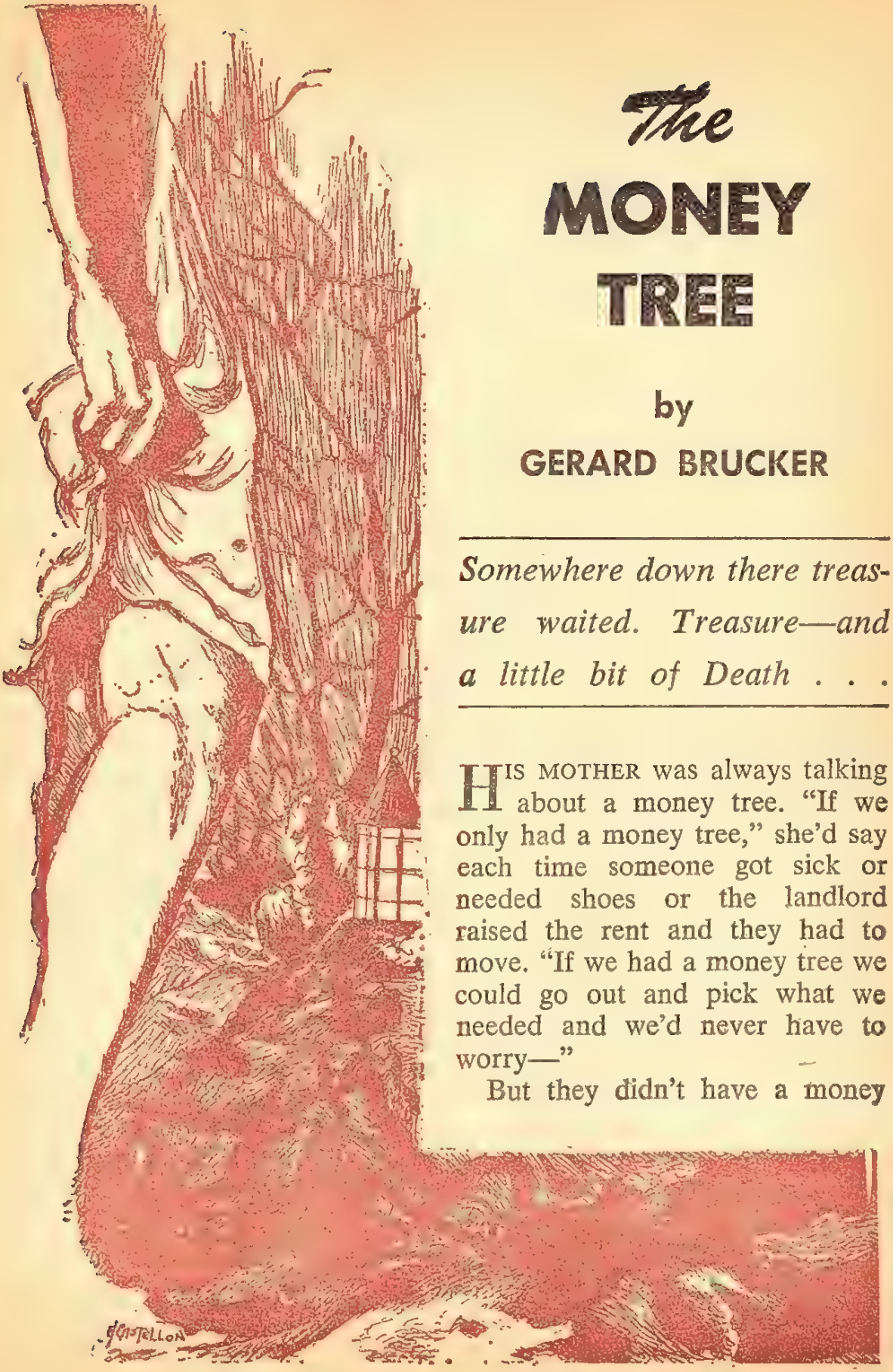


The MONEY TREE

by

GERARD BRUCKER

Somewhere down there treasure waited. Treasure—and a little bit of Death . . .

HIS MOTHER was always talking about a money tree. "If we only had a money tree," she'd say each time someone got sick or needed shoes or the landlord raised the rent and they had to move. "If we had a money tree we could go out and pick what we needed and we'd never have to worry—"

But they didn't have a money

tree, which is probably why she didn't say anything about the lumps in her breast until it was too late. Even then a money tree would have helped with the funeral.

Well, now he had a money tree. One he had tended carefully for almost two years. And tonight, only a little sooner than he'd intended, he was going to harvest its fruit.

He didn't like it, this plucking the fruit of his money tree before it was, you might say, quite ripe. But he had no choice. Marcia gave him no choice.

"Now," she said. "Now or not at all, Martin. Now or never again like this."

And the warm lush body writhed beneath him, leaving absolutely no doubt what 'like this' meant.

Later—

"I mean it, Martin. Now. Not six months. Not next month or next week. Now. Tonight. Or you'll never see me again."

He knew it was no use arguing any more, no use pleading with her to wait just the few more weeks until it would be safe.

What was a few short weeks, after almost two years?

Most of that time had passed quickly enough. It wasn't until recently, as the end neared—and especially since he had known Marcia—that the weeks began to drag so, that the time still to wait seemed forever.

But there was no use fighting it. Because he knew, looking down at her sprawled there on the rumpled bed in his sparse bedroom, at the voluptuous curves of her body—Marcia's perfect body, not too deeply tanned, banded white at breast and pelvic zones, tan and white outlined against the dark blue and tangerine backdrop of the silk robe—he knew it had to be now.

If only he hadn't told Marcia about the money tree.

But if he hadn't, it would have been all over by now.

Because Marcia was practical. She knew what she had, and what it was worth, and she meant to get it. When she walked, the swing of her full, firm hips plainly proclaimed, "For Sale—To The Highest Bidder."

From the start she had looked on Martin with mingled skepticism and scorn. He had two strikes on him: he wasn't good looking and he didn't appear rich.

And with Marcia it was obvious, from the day he first saw her on the beach flaunting her charms and their availability in a couple of wisps of bikini, money talked.

For a time, his money talked. On their first date the best part of his pay check spoke to Marcia each time, and she answered as only she could. After that, not only the pay checks, but big chunks of his savings—his legitimate savings, not that secret horde of his money tree.

Until the savings were gone, and his pay checks, what was left of

them after food and rent, could only finance the delight of Marcia's company every other week. And she, soon divining his apparrent poverty, told him to stop wasting her time.

"If you can only take me out every couple of weeks, Martin, forget it. There's lots of other men

want to take me out all the time. Like Harry—"

So then, reluctantly, he told her about his money tree.

Only hinting at first.

"Soon, Marcia dearest, just a little longer now, only a few weeks—so much money, you wouldn't believe me if I told you—"

"Wouldn't I? Try me."

When he saw that just hints weren't enough, he told her more. First, only the amount. But then, as her eyes glowed, her breath quickened, as she pressed him with questions, the full story. Hesitantly at first, growing bolder as he went on, until at the end he was actually boastful.

From the beginning—

Being drafted just when he was starting to make pretty good money at the hardware store—selling, now, after years as stock and errand boy. Thinking of some day taking old Mr. Perkins' place as manager. Even going into business, eventually, for himself.

Drafted.

Soon sent overseas, a sweltering lower Middle East country. Because of his stockroom experience they made him a supply clerk at the air base. Sweating away in the warehouses, cursing his luck, thinking always of the money he would have been making back in the good, clean United States.

Until one day a fat man with a greasy mustache approached him where he sat on a bench trying to get less hot in the breezeless shade behind the warehouse.

"You wanna money?" He displayed a sheaf of bills. "Lots money?"

Martin was afraid at first, but it had been just as easy as the fat man had said it would be. Doctoring shipping orders so incoming items never appeared on the inventory. Surveying out equipment still perfectly good. And a certain number of items could inevitably be "lost."

His superiors were no problem. The supply sergeant's time was largely occupied with a succession of native girls he shacked up with. The supply officer, an over-age-in-grade first lieutenant, was conducting exhaustive personal re-

search on various oriental drugs. Both the sergeant and the lieutenant were more than content to leave the running of the supply warehouse entirely to Martin.

Of course, he realized, misappropriation of government property was a serious offense—if you were caught. But if you were careful, if you weren't greedy, if you were satisfied with a little here, a little there—

A little at a time, but it was amazing how it added up. When his enlistment was over he took back to the states with him in a plain, string-wrapped cardboard box very nearly fifty thousand dollars in good U.S. currency—he'd always insisted they pay him in American money.

Of course, the first inventory after he left disclosed discrepancies; he hadn't been able to cover his tracks perfectly. So within a month of his discharge, they came to question him.

But he held up under their grilling, and they had only circumstantial evidence, no definite proof. And the thing that caused them to give up finally was the fact they couldn't find the money. Obviously, he hadn't spent it. He was living frugally, well within the income from his old job which he'd gotten back at the hardware store. Once again he was living in the tiny rented house in a modest neighborhood.

Of course they searched the house carefully, but paid no attention to the spindly little lemon tree newly planted in the yard back of the house.

"But we'll get you," the buzzard-beaked major told him, waving a thick finger under his nose. "Uniform Code of Military Justice, Article Forty-three, Statute of Limitations—Article Twenty-one. Theft. We've got two years."

Well, they hadn't gotten him yet, and now the time was almost up, and the lemon tree had grown, leafed out. The first full crop—it had produced only one shriveled miniature lemon the first year—weighed down its sharp-thorned branches, though the fruit was still green.

He took Marcia to his house, showed her, being careful they weren't seen by Jim Williams next door, the tree. The carefully cultivated ground around the trunk—the more you watered a lemon tree, he had been told, the juicier the lemons. The ground in which the money was buried in its waterproof wooden box.

For a short while Marcia seemed satisfied to wait.

Then Harry Chamberlain proposed.

Harry Chamberlain—handsome, college education, young-executive type, with a good salary and better prospects at the building-and-loan company where he worked. Flashy dresser. He drove a Mustang.

But he didn't have a money tree.

So, Marcia told Martin, she was going to turn Harry down.

If—

"If you'll dig up the money now, Martin. Because after all, I have only your word."

"But Marcia, the risk. If they catch me with the money—"

"They won't catch you, Martin. We'll go away. Mexico, Brazil."

"But—"

"Dig up the money now, Martin. Or I'll marry Harry Chamberlain."

He said he would dig up the money.

"Promise, Martin."

"I promise."

On the strength of that promise she had come to his house to spend the night. The night during which he would dig up the money. They would leave together at first light—

Why, really, did she come?

Was it because of a greedy desire to see the money as soon as possible after it came out of the ground? Or was it because she suspected his determination might weaken?

Was it as a goad to his wavering will that she gave herself to him in his bed?

And then, in the midst of this, when he made a last plea for more time, just those few weeks—

"No, Martin. Now. Or you'll never see me again."

Now.

This very night, this very hour, before the waning, late-rising moon showed above the hill.

Waning, but it would still be plenty bright enough for Jim Williams to see by.

Marcia had come with him to the back door, wanted to help him dig up the money, but he said no, it would be taking an unnecessary chance. So he turned out the light and left her there in the dark house, taking with him the memory of her, one hand holding the front of the robe together so ineffectually that he could see deep into the swelling breasts.

He found the shovel and pick in the garage, the shovel dirt-encrusted from the last time he'd banked up dirt for the watering basin, the pick rusted, unused since he'd planted the tree.

Digging, then, in the soft, moist earth.

Remembering when he had planted the tree. Digging the hole one afternoon, then in the dark of night making it deeper, depositing the money box in the bottom, covering it with dirt. The next day picking up the lemon tree at the nursery, a sickly-looking little thing with just a topknot of straggly branches, a few leaves. Planting it ostentatiously.

A man had a right to plant a tree if he wanted to, didn't he? He'd gotten permission from his landlady, hadn't he?

"All right, if it's not a messy tree, and don't have deep roots, so

if I want to take it up after you leave—"

The roots were giving him trouble; he kept hitting them unexpectedly with the pick, causing dull, thunking noises. At each "thunk" he paused, listened. Had Jim Williams heard?

Martin had been sure when Jim Williams moved in next door just after the investigation that he was a government man set to watch him. Secret service, treasury agent, FBI—

He had the look, somehow—thin, sharp-nosed, old-young face, restless eyes, tight mouth.

From the day Jim Williams appeared, Martin had the feeling he was being watched. But he could never catch him at it. Every time he saw the man on the other side of the low fence that separated the two houses the restless eyes were looking at something else, not him.

As the months went by his suspicions eased. Even for fifty thousand dollars the government wouldn't keep a man watching him for two whole years.

Or would it? If Martin had been able to learn what Jim Williams did, what his job was—

But he couldn't. When they talked—the few times they did talk, they were never, of course, friendly neighbors—Martin tried to pump him about it, but the other was evasive.

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that. I get by."

And the restless eyes would look at something beyond Martin's shoulder.

Twice he had followed Jim Williams when he left his house, trying to learn where he worked. But each time he'd lost him. It could have been accidental.

In a way, though, all this was reassuring. A government agent would have a "cover," wouldn't he? Some perfectly innocent seeming job—like, say, in a hardware store?

So there was little logic to Martin's suspicion of his neighbor.

Yet the feeling he was being watched from next door never entirely left him, and it was particularly strong whenever he did something involving the lemon tree—clipping off dead wood, spraying, reforming the irrigation basin, even merely feeling the lemons to see when one would be ripe enough to pick.

Well, he'd get no lemons from this tree.

As he dug the dirt from around the roots it gradually began to lean. Eventually he was able to see it over on its side with only a slight snapping of twigs and cracking of branches, scarcely aware of the thorns scratching his hands and wrists.

Then he was digging in the hole, the straggly spread of roots crookedly spidery beside him, sweating now in spite of the night chill. It was the time to dig when Jim Wil-

liams would be asleep. He smiled coldly, kept on digging.

Until finally—

Thunk!

The sound of a pick hitting planking of the box.

A few minutes more work to clear the dirt from around the box, lift it.

Didn't it seem heavier than when he buried it? Why? It must be his imagination.

Setting it on the ground beside the hole, scrambling up beside it, crouching, in a hurry now to get it open, to see the money again.

But the metal fastening, rusted, resisting his increasingly impatient efforts. Scratching his hands as he tried to turn it, the corroded metal hard and craggy in contrast to the damply smooth wood.

Grabbing up the pick, holding it with both hands near the head, banging it clumsily against the fastening—

Too anxious now to worry about noise. Banging the fastening, banging it again and again.

Should he go to the garage for a hammer?

Suddenly it broke loose, turned.

But the hinges, too, were rusty, it took all his strength to force the lid up while the hinges groaned complainingly—

Yet even with this sound, suddenly aware of the soft footfall behind him—or did he only imagine someone there, creeping closer?

Hands sliding down the pick, seeking the best position, tightening—

Rising and whirling and swinging the pick all in one motion, blindly, until at the final instant his eyes made out the shadowy form in the faint starglow.

Thunk!

The same sound, but seeming a little louder than when the pick had hit the wooden box, and at the same time a little softer.

He stared at the still form on the ground. Seeing it at first very dimly, then more and more distinctly.

A dark form, at first, later appearing light-on-dark, like a body unclothed except for a single garment that had fallen open—

With a sob, Martin dropped to his knees, reached out his hands, felt the soft, smooth, warm flesh.

"Marcia!"

His hands moved over the familiar contours of legs, stomach, breasts, until they encountered, as he had known they would, the soggy wet ruin of that beautiful face.

Some time later he rose, dazedly wiped his hands on his thighs.

He turned back to the wooden box.

Only one thing to do now. Grab the money and run. Run and hide, himself and the money. Plant another money tree, watch over it many, many more years, until—

Until when? He looked toward Marcia's body. There was no statute of limitations on this.

He plunged his hands into the

wooden box, wanting the reassurance of the neat bundles of banknotes—and felt instead a mess of thick, gruelly, somewhat lumpish soup.

Martin slowly withdrew his dripping hands, held them close to his face in the darkness, straining to see.

What was this stuff? Where was the money?

"All right, Martin!"

He was almost grateful for the glare from the flashlight suddenly beamed on him from the neighboring yard.

When his eyes adjusted he could see the gray-green contents of the box.

And he remembered all the times—at least once a week, twice a week during the hot, dry summers—he'd let the hose run for hours at a time, trickling water into the banked-up basin he'd formed around the trunk of his lemon tree.

His money tree.

"All right, Martin," said the calm but firm voice of Jim Williams behind the light. "No tricks now. Watch him, men. Leave the money alone, Martin."

Leave the money alone? Martin realized Jim Williams wasn't close enough to see into the box.

Leave the money alone?

Suddenly Martin threw back his head and laughed.

What money? This grayish-green mush?

This kind of money wouldn't even interest Marcia!

He stopped laughing, turned his head, looked toward the prostrate form plainly visible now in the light from the flash.

And then, ignoring Jim Williams, ignoring the two other shadowy shapes behind him on the other side of the low fence, Martin lifted the box in both hands, straightened, moved slowly, sleepwalker fashion, to where the still form lay.

Well, Marcia, he said to himself, it was money you wanted. Right now you wanted it, you couldn't wait. You couldn't even wait a few minutes more in the house, you had to come out and sneak up behind me.

All right, Marcia, you wanted money.

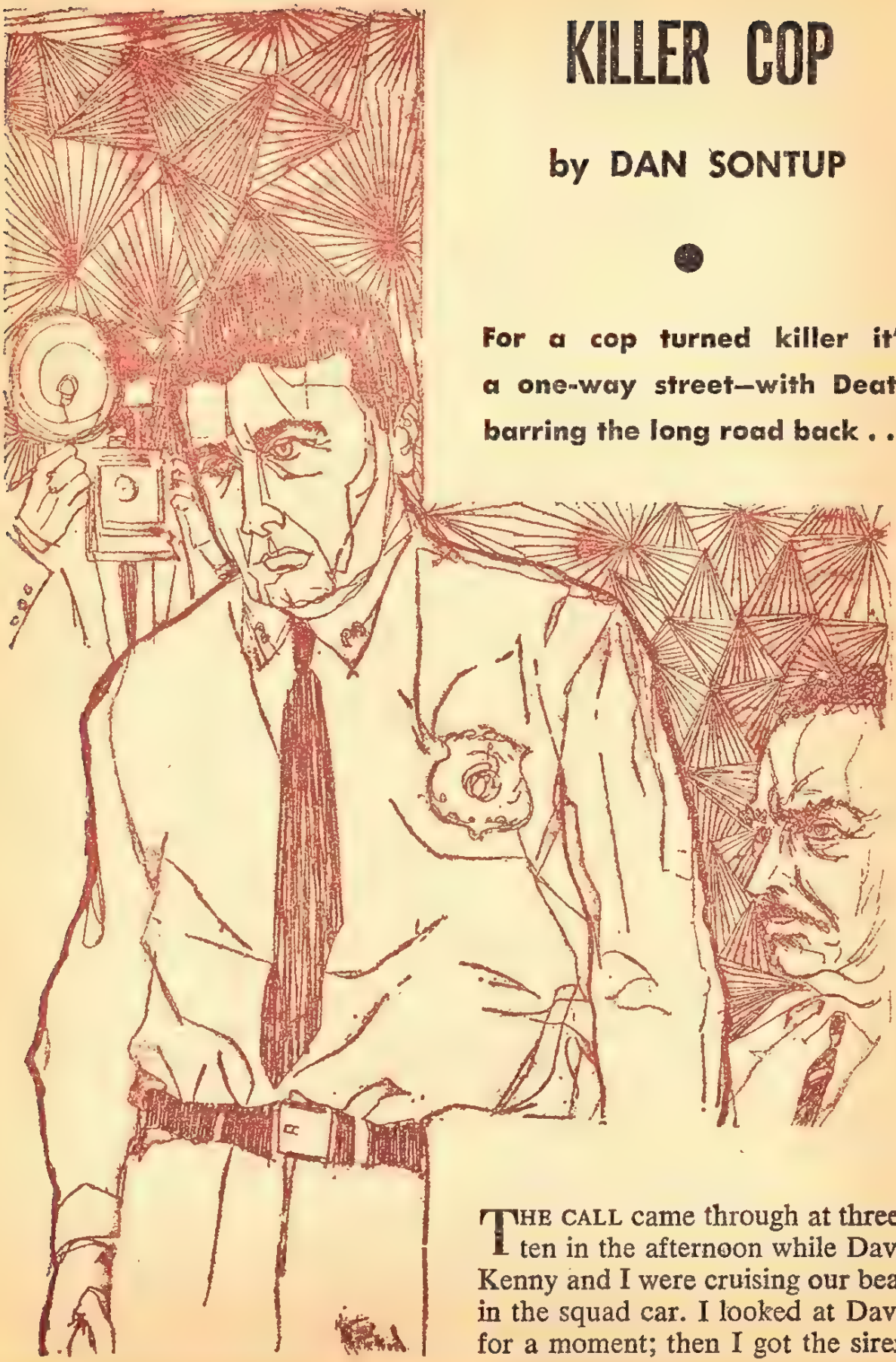
He held the box—the box that hadn't been waterproof after all, though the man who'd made it for him swore it was—he held the box out at arms' length, tilted it, let its contents slowly splash down over the lushly wanton curves of Marcia's lifeless flesh. His no more—nor any man's.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring U.N.C.L.E. NOVELS every month

KILLER COP

by DAN SONTUP

For a cop turned killer it's a one-way street—with Death barring the long road back . . .



THE CALL came through at three-ten in the afternoon while Dave Kenny and I were cruising our beat in the squad car. I looked at Dave for a moment; then I got the siren

and the red flasher going, and we started cutting through traffic.

Dave was silent all the way, staring straight ahead, his lips pressed tightly together. It took us only about five minutes to make it to the east end of town and to the little side street where they had him cornered.

Three other squad cars were already there, as well as Chief Bascombe's private car. They had the whole area roped off and the crowds held back at a safe distance.

Chief Bascombe spotted us and hurried over. He nodded briefly to me, then turned to Dave.

"He's up there," the chief said, motioning with a sharp jerk of his head to a four-story building in back of us. "He's holed up on the top floor in the rear apartment—and he's got your wife with him, Dave."

"Agnes is with him?" Dave said slowly.

Bascombe nodded.

"Can you get her down?" Dave asked.

"We tried. We called to Martin through the bull horn and told him to let her come down alone. He agreed but Agnes refused. She shouted down that she wouldn't leave Martin."

Dave's mouth dragged down at the corners, and his eyes were dark and brooding and full of pain. I walked over to him and put a hand on his arm.

"Take it easy, Dave," I said. "These things happen."

He looked at me for a long while without answering, then he said, "No they don't, Steve. A cop's wife can love another man. That can happen any time. But my wife doesn't just love another man. She's latched on to a killer, a little punk of a killer, and now she's up there with him." He shook his head doggedly. "No, things like that just don't happen."

I didn't answer him. There was nothing I could say. I'd known that Dave and Agnes weren't hitting it off, and all of us knew she'd left him, but I still found it hard to believe she'd walked out on Dave for someone like Martin—a cheap crook who, in a moment of panic on his last job, had shot and killed a watchman.

Dave shook his head again. Then he straightened up. "This is my job," he said to the chief. "I'm going to take him."

Bascombe pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. "Okay," he said. "I can't turn you down on that, Dave. But you're not going in there alone." He nodded to me. "I want Steve to go along with you."

Dave looked at me.

"All right," he said in a low voice. "But I'm the one who takes Martin. Remember that."

I nodded. Bascombe said, "It's the fourth floor rear. You go up by the stairs. No elevator in this old building. We've got a man on the

roof in case he tries to use the fire escape for a getaway."

"What about tear gas?" Dave asked.

"No good. There are steel shutters on the windows, and he's got them closed."

Dave grunted. "Agnes said she wouldn't come down?"

Bascombe nodded. "She yelled out to us that she loved him and would never leave him."

Dave's lips tightened. "Let me try to get her down before we go in after him. I want her out of the way. I want Martin alone in there."

Bascombe led the way to the alley in back of the building. There was a squad car at the entrance to the alley, and Bascombe reached inside and took out a bull horn and held it out to Dave. Dave ignored it. He walked out into the center of the alley and stood there out in the open, looking up at the top floor rear apartment. The steel shutters, originally installed to prevent burglaries, were shut tight.

"Martin!" Dave yelled, and his voice echoed through the alley. "Martin! Send my wife down."

There was no answer, but I could see one of the steel shutters open a crack.

Dave saw it too, and he yelled again: "This is Dave, Agnes. You come on down."

The steel shutters suddenly opened wider, and a hand with a gun came out. Before we could move there were two quick shots, and the pavement at Dave's feet erupted into two tiny geysers of shattered concrete.

The steel shutters swung shut again. Dave stood where he was, his head still tilted back, looking up at the top floor. He stayed that way for a long moment; then he turned and walked back to us.

Bascombe glanced up at the closed shutters and swore softly under his breath. "He must be crazy up there. That's the first time he's opened fire. We haven't opened up on him bcause we didn't want to hurt Agnes. We figured we might talk him down."

"There's no more time for talk now," Dave said.

The chief grunted. "Okay. Go in and get him. But be careful. No telling what he'll do, especially since he's got your wife with him."

Dave didn't answer him, just turned and started walking out of the alley. We followed him. When we reached the front of the house the chief left us. Dave and I now stood alone in the center of the street, the focus of attention for the crowd held in check by the police lines.

Dave took out his gun, checked it and I did the same with mine. Then Dave looked at me and I nodded, and we started across the street. A hush fell over the crowd when they saw what we were doing, and Dave and I walked the short distance across the street in almost complete silence.

We entered the house. It was even quieter there. All the tenants had been evacuated. Our footsteps echoed hollowly on the tile floor of the lobby.

Dave started up the stairs, and I put my hand on his arm and stopped him.

"Let's take him alive, Dave," I said.

He didn't answer me, just turned away and started walking up the stairs.

At the third floor landing we paused. Dave looked up to the fourth floor, and I came up close behind him and looked up also. The door to the fourth floor rear apartment was in plain sight just off the head of the stairs.

Suddenly Dave shouted, "I'm coming for you, Martin! Throw down your gun if you want to get out of this alive."

The apartment door opened and Martin suddenly came out into the hall. Before we could even get our guns lined up on him he snapped off two quick shots, both of them hitting the wall near Dave. Then Martin leaped back into the apartment and the door slammed behind him.

Dave moved fast. He took the last flight of stairs three steps at a time, with me right behind him. When we got to the door Dave didn't even pause. He raised one foot high and kicked the door just once. The door sprang open, and Dave and I lunged inside.

For a moment Dave's broad back blocked my view. Then he moved forward and I could take in everything in a glance. Across the room from us, standing in front of the window which was now open with the steel shutters swung out, was Martin, his gun in his hand, another gun tucked in his belt. And, at his feet, was the still form of Agnes.

Everything happened fast after that. Dave's gun hand came up and he snapped off a quick shot. The gun flew out of Martin's hand, blood spurting across the back of his knuckles where Dave's bullet had creased him.

Even as Martin's gun thudded to the floor, he was on his way out the window, moving faster than I thought anyone could. He vaulted through the open window and out on the fire escape before Dave could bring his gun to bear again and before I could move out from behind Dave for a clear shot.

The moment Martin leaped, I heard the boys in the alley open up with a fusillade of shots. Dave ran and knelt by Agnes, and I brushed past him and flattened myself against the wall by the window, not daring to stick my head out because of the steady stream of shots that were coming up from the alley.

Then the shots stopped, and I figured the coast was clear. I stuck my head out the window, and the cops in the alley shouted and pointed to the roof, telling me that Mar-

tin had gone up the fire escape to the roof.

I started up the ladder.

Maybe I was just a little too confident. I knew we had a man on the roof as well as men all around the house, and I forgot for a moment to be careful. I had gone about two rungs up the ladder when Martin's

head suddenly appeared above me on the roof, and he fired down at me.

It was close. The bullet hit the wall near me, ricocheted, and tore a big chunk of fabric from the sleeve of my jacket.

I leaped down from the ladder to the fire escape, cursing myself for not remembering the extra gun that Martin had in his belt. I crouched back against the wall and fired up at the roof, but Martin was gone by then. Down in the alley, I could see little spurts of flame and hear the sharp cracks of a series of shots as the men in the alley covered me.

I raised my own gun again, and we blanketed the edge of the roof with a hail of bullets. Then I heard a hoarse yell. Dave was coming through the window to the fire escape.

He was shouting and blazing away with his gun at the roof, and he shoved past me and started to climb the ladder. I made a quick grab for him and caught him just in time and pulled him back against the wall of the building with me.

He tried to get away from me, and he kept on yelling, "She's dead! She's dead!" But I held on tight, and I signaled the men below to hold their fire.

They stopped, and all was quiet, and we waited. There wasn't a sound. Dave and I crouched there on the fire escape, hugging the wall of the building, looking up to the roof, and for a time nothing at all happened.

Then, with a sudden lurch, Dave broke from my grasp and started up the ladder. I was right behind him. We got over the edge of the roof, and Martin was nowhere in sight. We looked around. Then I spotted the patrolman who'd been stationed on the roof. He was lying on his side next to a chimney, and we hurried over to him.

He was still alive, but not conscious. Across the top of his forehead was an ugly, bleeding red gash where Martin had evidently creased him with a bullet during all the shooting.

I went back to the edge of the roof and yelled for them to send up help and to start looking for Martin. Then I went back to Dave, and we did what we could for the wounded patrolman until help came. Then

Dave turned and went back down to the room with me following him.

Agnes was lying by the window. I looked at the blood on her dress and felt for a pulse, but I knew it was hopeless.

I straightened up and looked at Dave. He was standing there, his face set in hard lines, looking down at Agnes.

"He won't get far," I said to Dave. "We'll bring him in soon."

Dave didn't answer me, just stood there looking down at his dead wife, and finally I had to take him by the arm and lead him from the room. I didn't want him there when they came to take the body to the morgue.

Later, at the station house, Dave and I sat in the squad room and waited. He was silent, staring straight ahead out of eyes that were deeply sunken in dark sockets.

Almost every available man was now out looking for Martin. It was only a matter of time till they found him, and the chief had suggested that it would be best if I stayed with Dave until we received word of Martin's whereabouts. I did a lot of thinking while I sat there and watched Dave. My thoughts were far from pleasant.

I lit a cigarette and took a deep puff just as the chief came into the room with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He shuffled through the papers, glanced at Dave and then at me, and cleared his throat.

"Got the autopsy report and the ballistics dope," he said. "They rushed everything through for us."

Dave didn't even look up.

The chief cleared his throat again and went on. "The gun you shot out of Martin's hand has been checked out. No prints on it, but it's the same one he used to kill the watchman on that last job of his, and it's the gun that killed Agnes. The serial number was filed off, but the lab brought it out. It's one of the guns that was stolen in that sporting goods store robbery last year."

Dave still sat staring ahead, not looking at us, and the chief motioned for me to join him in the corner. I went over to him, and he looked at Dave and whispered to me, "He's taking it hard, Steve. I don't like it. I've seen cops hit hard like this before, and it's no good."

"He'll snap out of it," I said.

The chief grunted. "Maybe, but I'm worried. Something like this can do one of two things to him. Either it can make a walking vegetable out of him, a cop who loses interest in everything; or it can make a killer out of him, a cop who wants to kill every criminal he can get his hands on just to get even for what was done to him. Either way it's bad."

Chief Bascombe sighed and went over to Dave and put a hand on his shoulder. He started to say something to Dave, but just then the door opened and a uniformed cop stuck his head in and caught the chief's eye. The chief went over to

him and the two of them talked by the door for a while, then Bascombe came back to me.

"They've found him, Steve. Martin called in and said he wants to give himself up."

"He did *what?*" I said. I had a sudden feeling of doom.

I saw Dave's head come up suddenly, and he looked over at us then got to his feet and joined us.

"Martin called headquarters," the chief said. "He said he wants to give himself up, but he'll surrender only to Dave Kenny."

Deep in Dave's eyes I could see a look of excitement, but it faded away quickly.

The chief shook his head in puzzlement. "I don't know how he did it, but Martin managed to double back on his trail and sneak back into the same apartment where we had him cornered before. He's there now. He says he's been hit and is bleeding badly. But he swears he'll take one or more cops with him if anyone but Dave comes for him. He'll give himself up without a fight only if Dave comes for him alone."

Dave nodded solemnly, as though he understood everything perfectly.

"I'll do it," he said in a low voice.

"All right," Bascombe said, "but Steve is going in with you again, Dave. Martin won't be able to see the two of you going in from the front, so he won't know Steve is there. You can make the arrest yourself, Dave, but Steve will be hiding out in the hall to back you up if anything goes wrong."

"Okay," Dave said. "As long as I'm the one that takes Martin."

"Remember," Bascombe said, "I said you can make the *arrest*. That means you bring Martin back in one piece—and alive."

Dave stared at him. The chief said gently, "I know how you feel about all this, Dave, but you can't go out and use your gun for personal vengeance. No cop can do that. If Martin means what he says about giving up without a fight, then he's got a right to be brought in for a fair trial."

Dave glanced at me and then at Bascombe. He didn't say anything, just nodded his head.

"Okay," the chief said. "Get going."

In a few minutes we were back at the same street again, and I felt like we were going through the motions of the same dream all over again. Only this time it was at night and not in the afternoon.

The police lines were up. Floodlights played on the building. The crowd was noisy in the background, and everything was all set for Dave and me.

"We've got extra men on the roof and all around this area this time," Bascombe said. "He won't get away if he tries anything."

Dave grunted, checked his gun while I did the same; then we started across the street.

Everything was happening just

as it had before, and as I followed Dave across the street I thought about how we'd done the same thing that afternoon, and then I remembered what I had been thinking about in the squad room. By the time we had climbed the stairs and had reached the fourth floor landing, I knew what I was going to do.

I put my hand on Dave's arm and stopped him. He turned to face me.

"Take him alive, Dave," I said in a low voice.

"You said that before, Steve."

"I'm saying it again," I told him. "You don't want two killings on your hands today."

He looked at me for a moment and then smiled sadly, a smile that just touched the corners of his mouth.

"You mean Agnes?" he said.

"Yes."

"When did you find out, Dave?"

"Just now," I said. "I did some thinking back there in the squad room, but nothing clicked into place for me until a minute ago. The chief said that Martin's gun had no prints on it. Who wiped it clean? Martin certainly never had a chance to do that, and there was no reason for him to wipe his prints off anyhow. But you wouldn't want your prints on the gun if you had used it to kill Agnes."

"Is that all you had to go on?" Dave asked.

"No. There was also the fact that Martin fired for the first time when he took a couple of shots at you in the alley, and he fired again for the second time when he took two more shots at you on the stairs. The chief told us that he hadn't used the gun before while they had him cornered in the room.

"So the only time Agnes could have been killed with that gun was while you were in the room with her. I figure you shot her while all the noise was going on outside when we were shooting away at Martin on the roof."

Dave sighed. "You're a good cop, Steve. You've got a real head on your shoulders."

"Why'd you do it?" I asked him.

He lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. He looked like a man groping for something he didn't quite understand.

"I don't know," he said. "When we busted in on Martin and I took a shot at him, I was shooting to kill. But I snapped off my shot too fast and just got him in the hand. And then, when I knelt by Agnes on the floor after you had gone out the window after Martin, I saw that she had only fainted. She started to come to right then, and the first thing she said was Martin's name.

"You don't know what it's like, Steve, to have a wife that's in love with another man. It's even worse when you're a cop and your wife's lover is a lousy little hood. Like I said, I guess I just went crazy when she called his name the first thing after coming out of her faint. I

cursed her and picked up his gun from the floor, and I killed her with her lover's own gun."

He smiled sadly again. "And then I did something that any criminal would do—I wiped my prints off the gun. After that, the craziness seemed to hit me again. All I could think of was that it was Martin's fault I had killed Agnes, and all I wanted to do was to go out that window and get him."

I waited, not saying anything, and Dave looked at me and said, "What are you going to do about all this, Dave, now that you know?"

I looked at him, then down at the gun in his hand, then over at the door of the apartment where Martin was waiting.

"Let's get him first," I said. "That's the most important thing now. But remember—we take him alive. I'll be right out here waiting."

Dave nodded, shifted his gun to his left hand, wiped the palm of his right hand on his pants, then shifted the gun back to his right hand. I stepped back and Dave walked to the door, flattened himself along the wall beside it, and called out, "Martin, this is Dave. I'm coming in now."

There was a moment of quiet, and then a muffled voice came. "The door's not locked. Come on in—but come alone."

Dave moved over in front of the door and opened it.

I was standing where I could see over Dave's shoulder into the room. The light was on, and Martin stood by the same window, only this time both the window and the shutters were closed.

Martin and Dave stood there looking at each other. Martin was holding one hand at his side where a red stain had splotched his shirt, and his other hand hung loosely, hidden by his body as he faced Dave in a sort of sideways stance.

"I loved her," Martin said. "I loved her more than you'll ever be able to understand. This is for Agnes."

He raised his other hand, and I saw a gun in his fist.

I moved forward, bringing my gun up, ready to back up Dave. But all Dave did was to smile sadly again and lower his own gun.

I pulled the trigger on my gun, snapping off a shot, but it was too late. Even as my bullet crashed into Martin's chest, his own gun bucked and roared in his hand. Dave spun clear around and fell to the floor. A split second later, Martin hit the floor also. Then all was quiet.

I walked into the room and looked down at Dave Kenny's body—at the cop who had turned killer and had then picked his own way of dying, even to being his own executioner.

I holstered my gun and started slowly down the stairs.

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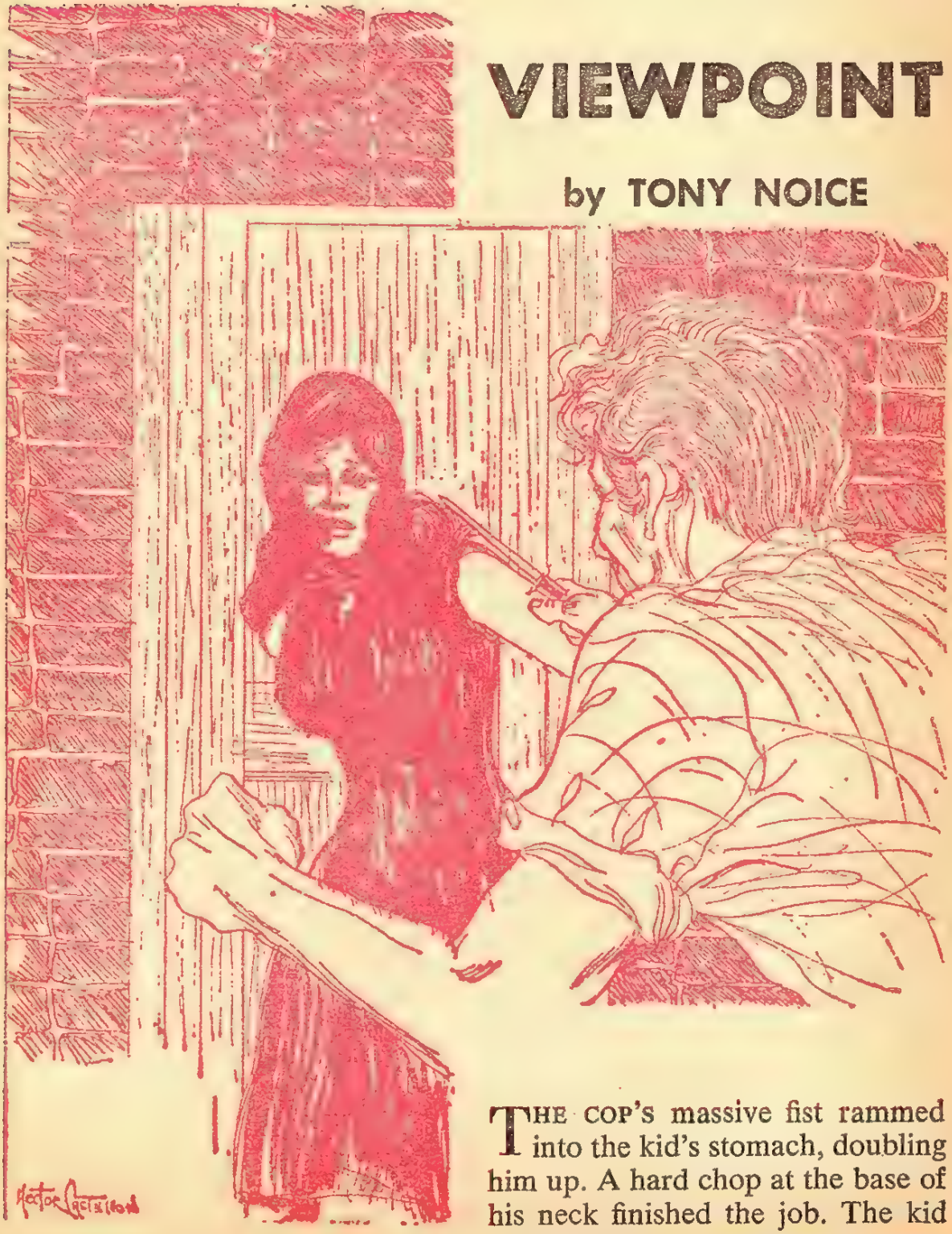
ON SALE EVERYWHERE!

One more dark block to walk, she told herself. Just one more—and then she heard the soft steps behind her . . .

VIEWPOINT

by TONY NOICE



THE COP'S massive fist rammed into the kid's stomach, doubling him up. A hard chop at the base of his neck finished the job. The kid crumpled to the pavement. He was

hauled quickly to his feet, frisked and loaded into a waiting squad car.

A crowd had gathered and was murmuring its approval.

"Serves the punk right."

"I hear he tried to grab a woman's purse."

"That cop sure knew how to handle him."

"You're not kidding. If we had more men like that on the force we'd all be better off."

On the fringe of the crowd a small, neatly dressed girl watched, appalled at the treatment of the boy and the reaction of the spectators.

The sadists, she thought, *the disgusting, bloodthirsty sadists.*

Helen Martinson had always hated bullies. This time she intended to do something about it. She asked the newsdealer the way to the police station and marched off, getting madder with every step.

When she arrived, she was shocked by its condition—a squat, ugly building more run-down than the tenements it adjoined. It was unlike anything in the quiet town where Helen had spent most of her life.

She shuddered as she passed the shabby wooden doors and walked up to the desk sergeant.

"There was a boy brought in here a few minutes ago."

The sergeant looked up from his blotter and wiped the sweat from his face. "That's right, Miss. You want to make a charge against the kid?"

"I should say not—I want to make a charge against the policeman."

"Against the policeman? You the kid's sister or somethin'?" the sergeant asked.

"Since when do you have to be a relative to object to the beating of a child?"

The sergeant growled, "Child hell, lady—these bums are killers at twelve. Anyway, what's your interest in it?"

"My interest? I saw an unarmed boy being brutally beaten by a man twice his size."

"For your information, Miss, the boy had a knife which he dropped in the subway, and the woman whose purse he grabbed can give a positive identification—the kid's obviously guilty. Now excuse me, I'm very busy."

The color drained from Helen's face.

"No wonder you're busy," she snapped. "You're doing three jobs —judge, jury and executioner all at once!"

A plain-clothesman walked over from the water cooler. "Miss, how long have you lived in the city?"

"About a month."

He nodded soberly, "Yeah, that figures," and went into a back room.

Helen stormed out of the police station, determined to write her congressman as soon as she found

out who he was. For weeks after that, her temperature rose every time she saw a blue uniform. But eventually the resentment faded; a new job, new friends occupied her thoughts.

One of those new friends was about to get married. On the Friday before the wedding, Helen attended the shower. Having no husband or family to run home to, she stayed till after midnight helping put the apartment in order.

When she left, she found the night comfortably warm and decided to walk the four blocks to her car. Still thinking about the party, she paid no attention to the dark, empty street.

It was just past the second block that she noticed the kid—A pimple-faced youth in faded jeans and a maroon tee shirt. He reminded her of the boy she had seen beaten —a little older and thinner perhaps, but with that same look of years of neglect. Was he following her?

Helen stopped at the corner, pretending to read the street sign. The kid was about thirty yards back, peering into a darkened shop window.

She crossed the Avenue. One more block to the car. Ahead the street was almost pitch black—no open stores, no lighted doorways, no people. She pulled the stole tightly over her bare shoulders while quickening her pace. She listened carefully but heard only the sound of her high heel shoes. Did that mean he had stopped following? She visualized him and saw the dirty sneakers on his feet—he could be within a few yards without her hearing him.

The car was in sight now. Helen fumbled in her purse for the keys. The kid suddenly darted ahead, blocking her path.

"Hey, don't go so fast, baby."

Helen's hand shook as she held out her purse. "There's not much money in it, but go on, take it."

The kid grinned. "Yeah, I'll take it—later." He started toward her.

"Go away, please. I'll scream!"

"Oh, you don't know the people around here baby; a scream just makes them turn the T.V. louder. Besides, it might make me nervous."

His right hand made a short circular movement and a six-inch blade popped into view. Helen shrank from him, not realizing she was backing into a doorway. She tried to scream but nothing came. A hand clamped tightly over her mouth. She felt her shoulder-strap strain, then break. Her knees had just started to buckle when the spotlight snapped on.

The kid whirled around. Two policemen closed in on him.

Was it relief or pleasure that made Helen Martinson smile as the cop's massive fist rammed into the kid's stomach, doubling him up. As a hard chop at the base of his neck . . .

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